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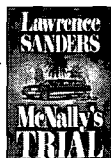
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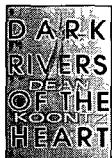
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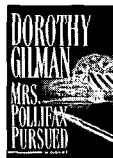
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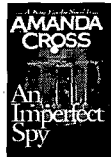
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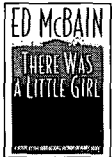
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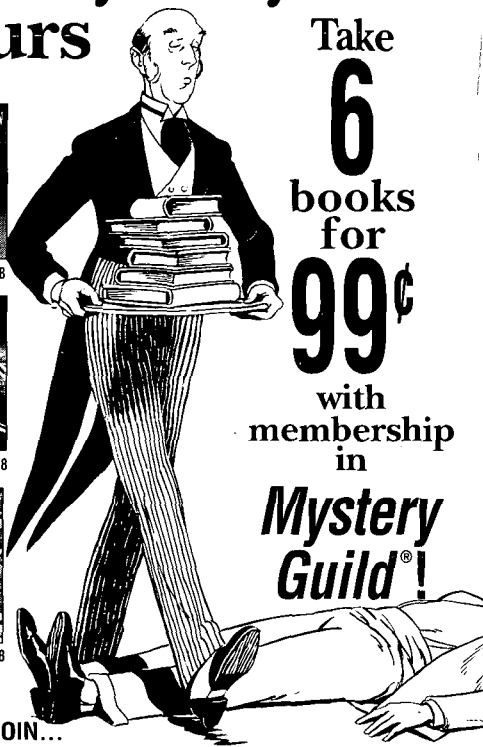
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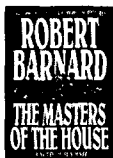
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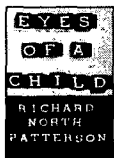
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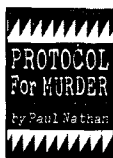
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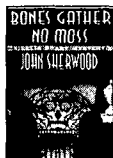
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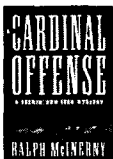
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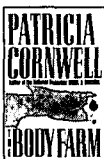
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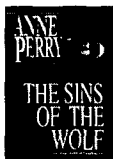
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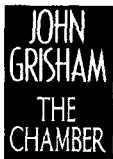
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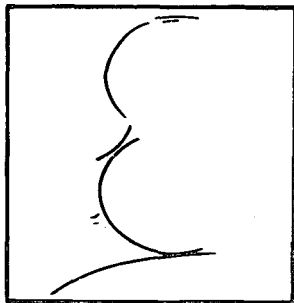
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

In 1995, the Mystery Writers of America celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the organization. As part of that celebration, last year MWA sponsored a "Golden Mysteries" short story contest with two divisions, one for new writers and one for those who had been previously published. Our readers may remember seeing the announcement of the contest in AHMM.

The winners have now been named, and we are glad to be able to bring you the three prize-winning stories in the new writers category.

First place went to Jacqueline Freimor for "Strangle, Strangle"; second place to Susan J. Pethick for "Crazy Carlos Picks a Winner"; third place

to Chris Rogers for "Spare Change."

Noted authors Clark Howard and Walter Satterthwait, along with this editor, were the contest judges for the new writers group of entries.

Ms. Freimor, a native New Yorker, is a medical editor and has an M.A. in anthropology from NYU. A second story, "The Essence of Arthur Polkowsky," appeared last fall in *Red Herring Mystery Magazine*.

Ms. Pethick, who hails from San Diego, currently lives in Vancouver, Washington. Present occupation: Mom. (In addition to writing, of course.) Ms. Pethick was formerly a data systems analyst for the Space
(continued on page 30)

Cathleen Jordan, Editor; **Susan A. Teitz**, Assistant Editor; **Jean Traina**, Design Director; **Terri Czeczko**, Art Director; **Anthony Bari**, Junior Designer; **Marilyn Roberts**, Director of Production; **Carole Dixon**, Production Manager; **Cynthia Manson**, Vice President of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights; **Constance Scarborough**, Contracts Manager; **Barbara Parrott**, Director of Newsstand Circulation; **Bruce Schwartz**, Director of Circulation, Subscription Sales; **Dennis Jones**, Operations Manager, Subscription Sales; **Fred Sabloff**, Associate Publisher; **Judy Dorman**, Advertising Sales Manager. **Advertising Offices**, New York: (212) 782-8549. **Advertising Representative**: Dresner Direct, Inc., New York, New York, (212) 889-1078.

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Line of Duty

Stephen Wasylyk

Pressing down on the rolling hills, the humid heat caused man in general to sweat and curse but encouraged certain of the lowest forms in the ecological chain to multiply, spread, chew, and blight with primeval glee.

In the small apple orchard on the hill above the house, a masked, gloved, hatted, and freely perspiring Roback was attempting to curb their enthusiasm with his sprayer, hoping to save at least some of the season's yield.

Overriding the hiss of the nozzle, the staccato barking of the dog echoed up the slope. He released the trigger on the wand, brushed sweat from his brow, and looked down the orchard row.

Because the two-lane macadam made a sharp turn at the corner of the fenced yard before rolling toward the horizon, he could clearly see the brown bitch at full alert at the end of the twenty foot chain anchored beside the front door of the white farmhouse, eyes fixed on two men slowly approaching along the blacktop through shimmering heat.

Giving the alarm. Her job. Too many incidents of strangers walking into a man's house while it was unoccupied or his wife unprotected.

The dog would protect Shelley, all right. Definitely her dog, her scent alone enough to set the short tail wagging furiously.

The dog only tolerated Roback, which was fine with him. Never big on pets, he believed animals on a farm were there to earn their keep.

He pulled off the mask, unslung the heavy sprayer, and massaged his shoulder.

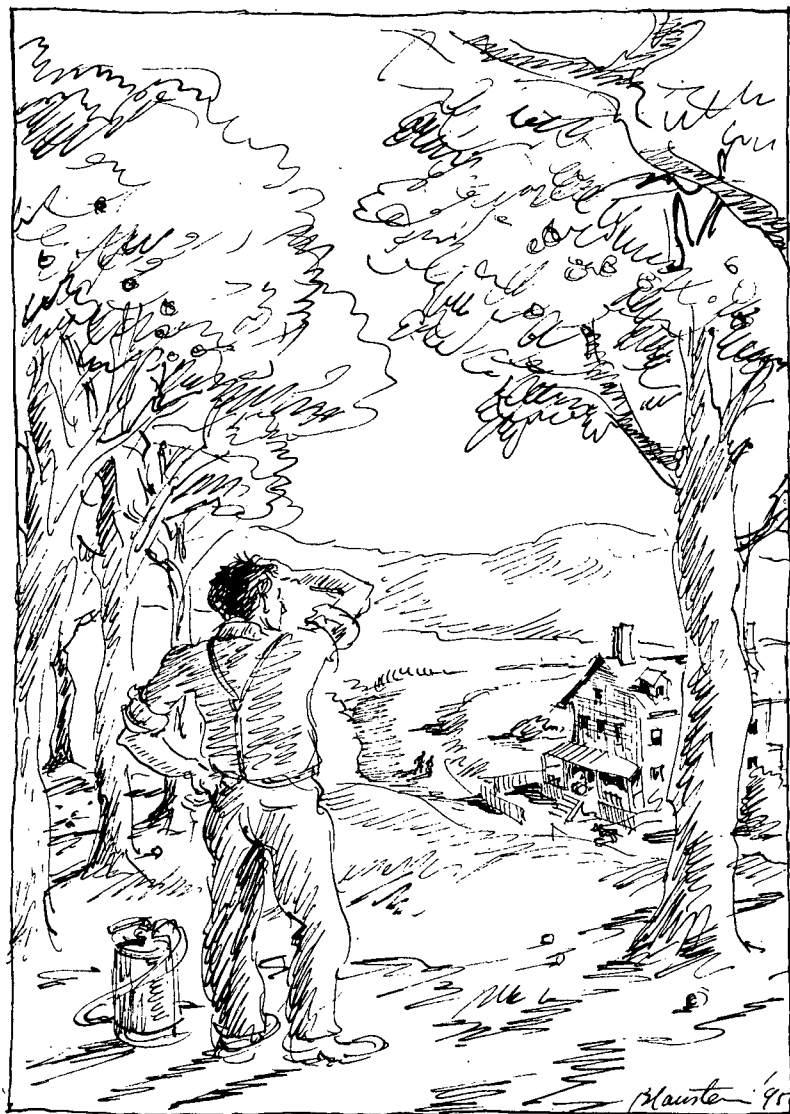
"Choice between us, I go," he'd said to Shelley.

Shelley had laughed.

"Watch," said Roback. He placed one hand on her shoulder and lifted the other. The dog was on her feet instantly, head lowered, growling.

"Now you threaten me," he said.

Shelley raised her hand.



DEEPSET EYES SLITTED AGAINST THE SUN, HE WATCHED AS THE MEN
STOPPED AT THE GATE.

The dog's ears lifted.

"Know what she's saying?" asked Roback. "Go get him, babe. I'll back you up."

Shelley smiled and stroked the dog's head, undiluted adoration in the bitch's brown eyes at her touch.

He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, removed his hat, and drew the cloth across his balding head, wondering if the dog was so extra protective because she sensed Shelley's disability.

Deepset eyes slitted against the sun, he watched as the men stopped at the gate, beyond the reach of the dog, feeling a touch of anger when his wife came out on the porch in her wheelchair. He'd told her countless times to stay inside, that there was no point in advertising for the benefit of those who might be looking for an edge. She'd patted the Ladysmith .38 Special he'd bought for her and grinned at him.

If he didn't know better, he could almost believe she did it deliberately to irritate him. Stubborn woman, Shelley. Insisted on doing everything she'd done before the accident unless it was downright impossible. Wise woman, Shelley. Knew that if she allowed that disability to get the upper hand, they'd have no choice but to sell out and move on. Loved the place as much as he did. Almost as much as she loved that dog.

She rolled down the slight ramp, the dog an alert bodyguard at her side. After a short talk, the half-inch figures of the men continued along the road toward Roback, while Shelley propelled herself back into the house.

Roback slipped the slim transceiver from the holster on his belt, pressed the button, and said, "What was that all about?"

"The big one is my lover, but I told him he'd picked the wrong time because you were watching."

"You should have told him to forget the whole thing because I'm *always* watching. Why are they walking in this heat?"

"They said their car broke down a half mile back and they wanted to use the phone. I told them they had my sympathy but, since they needed help, they'd be better off by walking another two miles to the service station at the crossroads."

"More like three miles."

"So they'll curse the dumb broad and sweat a little more. The bugs are calling, Aphid Man. Get back to work."

He grinned and reholstered the unit. Until he'd become smart enough to buy the transceivers, he'd run back to the house almost

every hour to see if she was all right. A lot of heated arguments over that. Bless technology for bringing peace to the household.

She didn't know it, but he planned to get her a computer, not only to ease her keeping of their financial records, but also to provide her with another link to the outside world. Farm wife in a wheelchair speeding down the information highway.

Taking a final swipe with the handkerchief and replacing his hat, he grunted as he swung the sprayer across his broad shoulders. Something made him pause before resuming spraying. He waited, watching the men come down the road toward him.

The green hills rolled away, brilliant under a cloudless sky. Far down the valley, the new medical center glistened on its hilltop perch.

No rain soon and he'd really take a licking on this year's crop. The dog was quiet now, like the birds and insects; the only sound the slight roar from a jet leaving a contrail in the fifty-below cold at forty thousand feet.

Could use some of those ice crystals down here, thought Roback wryly.

The news that morning had mentioned a strike at the plant some fifty miles away. Fifteen an hour the men wanted. His lips twisted. Try dawn to dusk, seven days a week, for a buck and a half per.

The men stopped directly below him. One was average size, the other looming large in the bright sun. They seemed to argue before starting back toward the house.

Roback cursed and slipped out of the harness.

More than knee high, with a short head, deep chested, and brown in color, there was no telling what the dog's bloodlines were, which mattered not at all. As a watchdog she was worth her weight in gold—but that chain confined her to the front of the house to give the alarm and act as a deterrent.

She could be circumvented, since the post and rail fence was merely decorative, cutting back on the far side to enclose the neglected garden, one of the few things Shelley could no longer manage; the near side ending in a small grove. Its length was broken by the gate opening and the entrance to the gravel driveway that led to the barn and other outbuildings in the rear.

Which was why Shelley had the Ladysmith, but there were times when a gun might not be enough.

Strides lengthened by the slope, he moved to intercept them, catching up where the road curved.

Brought up short by the chain, the dog hung suspended by her collar, standing on her rear legs, eyes bright with menace.

The man was bigger than Roback thought; a good three inches taller than his six feet, the body proportioned to go with the height, pectorals and biceps straining his white T-shirt, lower torso poured into jeans. The face was ruggedly handsome, curly hair sun-bleached, a look in the blue eyes as though they were regarding you from a distance. The face was vaguely familiar.

Congeniality and politeness had never been Roback's strong points, and the heat, interruption, and rapid walk made him even more irritable. "What do you want?" he asked harshly.

Perspiration soaking his light shirt, the smaller man swept sweat from his forehead with a thin hand. Straight dark hair queued back; deepset, dark eyes shadowed by the sun but flitting and restless. Well dressed, compared to the big man. Knitted shirt with designer's logo, slacks well tailored, expensive leather shoes.

"Take it easy, mister. Our car broke down back there over the rise. You know how they are these days. We'll need a tow—just want to use your phone."

Maybe, thought Roback. And maybe you saw a woman in a wheelchair and thought *why not*.

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Village in walking distance with a service station."

"So she said, but it's a long walk in this heat—"

"Want to see Joanie," said the big man.

Joanie?

"What's he talking about?" demanded Roback.

"Aw, just something in his head. Your wife reminds him of a woman he used to know." The small man tapped his forehead. "Sometimes he gets confused."

Roback looked into the blue eyes and thought sometimes didn't cover it.

The big man took a step toward the house. Voice as cold as the ice crystals in the contrail, Roback caught his arm and whirled him around. "I said keep walking."

The big man's nostrils flared. The small man stepped between them. "Take it easy, Con."

Roback could swear—he glanced at the smaller man.

"Do I know him?"

The dark eyes flicked over Roback, the hills, and the house as though looking for an escape route.

"Naw. We're not from around here. Just passing through. I told you. Our car—"

"I want to talk to Joanie," said Con.

"In a minute, Con."

"Not in a month of Sundays," snapped Roback.

"Jesus, mister, have a heart. The guy's harmless. Lost a little reality when he banged his head a while back. He's been looking for this Joanie ever since. Medical expenses cleaned him out, so I've been taking care of him. All you got to do—"

The heat of anger driving the coldness from his voice, Roback said, *"I got to do nothing. You do. Get moving."*

The dog still stood, held upright by the chain. Damned fool would choke herself. He knew she wouldn't. Her throat and shoulder muscles were like iron.

The small man tugged at Con's arm. "Come on, Con."

"Joanie's in the house, Fred," said Con stubbornly. "You said so." *You said so?*

Roback felt a tingle of warning, felt menace now in the humid heat, like a small, seemingly innocent pile of dead leaves suddenly becoming the mottled coils of a rattlesnake. He'd made a mistake, intercepting them. A whiff of those chemicals must have addled his brain. He should have gone directly to the house, got the shotgun—

Con started toward the house. Barking, the dog threw herself against the chain to meet him. Roback stepped past Fred, wrapped a hand over Con's shoulder, and pulled.

He never saw what Fred hit him with, something exploding behind his right ear; unconscious before his face hit the hot black macadam.

The frantic barking of the dog, as much as anything else, brought him around; deep massive pain threatening to split his head apart, eyes opening to stare into tall weeds inches from his face, long seconds before he realized he'd been rolled off the road into the deep watercourse, longer still before memory tiptoed back tentatively, feeling its way through the pain, and when it did, panic took over. He tried to scramble to his feet, pitched forward. Tried again and again, until he reached the fence and used it to pull himself erect.

The dog was barking and furiously trying to claw her way through the aluminum panel of the storm door.

They're inside, thought Roback. Around the dog and through the rear. But Shelley would have heard the dog, known something was wrong, and been ready—

Using the fence for support, he reached the gate, reeled through, and released the dog, staggering after the bitch as she flashed around the house, dimly noting that the phone wire snaking down the side had been cut; made it to a stanchion supporting the patio roof in the rear where he sagged and clung with both hands, fighting nausea and gaping at the nightmare of a double-imaged, screaming, blood-covered Fred bursting through the door pursued by the dog; watching as the bloody, out-of-focus figure dived into the blurred shed where he kept some of his light tools just in time to slam the door in the face of an airborne, indistinct brown fury whose hurtling weight shook the shed with a dull boom.

He rubbed his eyes, trying to clear his vision, pushed away from the patio stanchion and through the door, the screen flapping where it had been cut to get at the inside latch.

Inside, Con was on the floor to the left, back propped against the base cabinet, T-shirt stained with blood.

On the other side of the kitchen, Shelley sprawled on the floor alongside her overturned wheelchair, the Ladysmith just beyond her hand, the cordless phone she always kept with her under one bent knee, her transceiver a few feet away.

Clinging to the cabinets for support, Roback made his way to her side, knelt, and tenderly fingered a massive bruise on her face, taking in the small pool of blood under her head.

She would have heard the dog, but not known what was going on because he and the men couldn't be seen from inside the house; tried to call him on the radio. No answer, so she'd probably tried to dial for help on the phone, not aware they'd cut the wire. While she punched frantically at buttons, her confusion had given them enough time to get through the door. Still, she'd had time to shoot Con, but Fred must have reached her before she could shoot again. He'd hit her, knocking the wheelchair over and driving her head into the sharp corner of the base cabinet.

He'd been somewhere in the house when the dog found him.

Roback felt for a pulse, found none, wasn't alert enough to tell if she was alive or dead, couldn't make that decision. He had to get her to the medical center, let someone whose brains hadn't been scrambled take that responsibility.

And Roback, normally a stoical man who took things as they came, showing neither overwhelming excitement at good news nor extreme sadness at bad, threw his head back and roared with an ancient fury . . . a battle cry of rage and hate that promised death to the enemy . . . but no time now to run to the toolshed and empty the gun into Fred . . .

He scooped up his wife. Head pounding, double vision back, room swimming, nausea churning his stomach, gelatinous knees threatening to give way with each step, he zigzagged out the door and toward his pickup, wondering if he could manage to keep it on the road. Staggering like a drunk who'd had three too many, eyes fixed on the distant, gleaming medical center where they had saved Shelley once and had to do so again, he sank lower and lower until he pitched forward on top of his wife, legs scraping uselessly at the gravel of the driveway until they quivered and stopped.

The dog was snarling again nearby. He opened his eyes and lifted his head to stare into the flat-eared, fangs-bared, bloody, foam-flecked face two feet from his.

An atavistic fear bubbled. No mistaking the menace there. The prey was down, but this was no food kill by a wild animal. This was revenge. As far as the dog was concerned, he was just as accountable as the other two for the still form pinned beneath him. And he was. The primary responsibility to protect her had been his. He'd failed. Denied vengeance on the man in the shed, she'd extract it from the next on her list.

"No!" he croaked, hoping the dog wasn't beyond listening to him. She couldn't know that at this point he was the only hope that Shelley had.

The haunches sank, the body a spring about to uncoil.

Shelley moaned softly, the sound magic; the lips lowered over the fangs, the body softened, the ears rose questioningly, and the tail moved in delighted anticipation. The dog settled with her nose an inch from Shelley's face, tongue flicking out to lick her cheek.

Fighting the nausea, Roback rose to his hands and knees. His head pounded . . . a sweat that had nothing to do with the oppressive heat poured from him even though he felt cold . . . there was something very badly wrong with him. And getting worse . . . beyond any willpower to overcome. Couldn't carry her, couldn't drive. He knew that now. If he didn't get help, they'd both die there under the brutal sun.

And then from deep inside his injured brain, something whispered *phone*, and he remembered the cellular unit he'd installed in the pickup so he could keep in touch with Shelley even on the road.

With the slow, hesitant, rocking instability of an infant, he crawled to the truck, pulled himself erect, fumbled the phone into his hand, pushed the button and fingered out a number. Blackness as deep as death descending again, all he could do was whisper, "Roback," over and over until he passed out.

On the hillside from where he'd seen it all begin, wearing a white bandage like a headband, he sat and rested before resuming his unfinished spraying. No work for a week, they'd said, when they'd sent him home after opening his skull. A subdural hemorrhage is nothing to fool around with.

Neither were the aphids and fungi that were celebrating a ten day hiatus from his sprayer.

Chambers had stood beside his bed holding his broad-brimmed hat in both hands, a wisp of a man with ruddy skin pulled tight over a bony face, body lithe under the tailored tan uniform, gray hair cut to a half inch. In twenty years, no one had ever run against him for sheriff.

"The man who took the call didn't know what the hell was going on," he said. "To him it sounded like someone saying, 'Go back, go back,' which made no sense at all, but he also said, 'Breaking up like one of them cellular phones.' Bulb lighted in my head. I remembered us talking about how that cell phone would keep you in touch with Shelley wherever you were, so I put one and two together and slammed out of there.

"When I found you, I couldn't tell what in the hell had happened. You were out cold. So was Shelley. The big guy was dead in the kitchen. Then I heard the one in the toolshed moaning. When I pulled him out, I figured he couldn't last very long without help. In the few seconds she'd had at him, the dog turned him into some pretty raw meat, and he was losing blood fast. I'd already called for an ambulance so the guys slapped a couple of pressure bandages on him, but hell, you and Shelley were our first priority. I let him bleed until the second unit came. For my money, the techs did too good a job because he survived, but maybe that was a good thing because then he could tell us all about it."

Chambers settled his rear end on the windowsill.

"I don't have to tell you what would have happened to you both if it hadn't been for that dog. Fred would have left no witnesses. He thought he'd killed you already when he sapped you with that blackjack. Haven't seen one of those in a long time. Used it on Shelley, too, the son of a bitch. Real warped character, that man. He was using the big guy Con—"

"He looked familiar," said Roback.

"You probably saw him on TV. What he was was an actor in a cop show that bombed after a couple of episodes a few years back. Played a vice squad detective, they tell me. But you know some of these show biz personalities. Push clean living on the screen and go home and snort coke, like the rules don't apply to them. He should have paid more attention to the part he was playing. Stoked himself up pretty good one night with some controlled substance and thought he was Superman. Tried to fly from a second floor balcony but naturally hit the courtyard below faster than a speeding bullet. Must have thought he was rescuing Lois Lane because he took an actress named Joanie with him. Anyone as lucky as her should have run out and bought a fistful of lottery tickets. She landed on his six three and two hundred pounds of padding. Then Fred came along, figured that he could use someone that size as an intimidator, so they roamed the lonely places of the country leaving blood and tears behind. Car broke down and could we use the phone, ma'am, was only one of their techniques. At last count, they're wanted in three states for questioning, but those are only the early returns."

Chambers leaned forward and picked up the water glass. "You're going to drink this? No?" He drained the glass and refilled it for Roback from the pitcher. "Too bad Shelley didn't shoot him instead of Con, but there are a lot of people out there who are going to applaud what the dog did to him, maybe even prefer it that way since the dog left him with a lot more scars than our justice system ever will. Anyway, thanks to the dog, modern communications, and medical science, you and Shelley'll be fine. But if the dog had picked up and run, neither of you would have lived long enough to benefit from the modern communications and medical science. Message of some kind there, I think."

He patted Roback on the shoulder. "The bad memories'll fade. I know. Had a few myself I thought wouldn't, but they did."

Mine faster than Shelley's, thought Roback.

The house below him was deserted. A few more days before Shelley would be released. Reconstructing that cheekbone took longer than patching up his head.

She'd like what he did, he knew.

"I had no choice," Chambers had said. "You were unconscious, and the dog, well, she couldn't know we were the good guys, could she? Allowed us to drag you away, but wouldn't let us get close to Shelley. I mean, Shelley was lying there. I had no idea how bad she was and how much time we had—no time to fool around—shame. Good dog, that. Guess you could call it line of duty."

Shelley didn't know yet.

Good neighbors, the Burnses. When they'd heard, they'd brought over the bitch's pup they'd taken last spring. Twin to the mother.

"For Shelley," Burns had said.

The young dog sat beside Roback, ears up, eyes fixed on the house as though she sensed her inheritance. Roback knew that when Shelley came home, the dog would attach herself to her, retaining perhaps some dim puppy memory of a motherly charge.

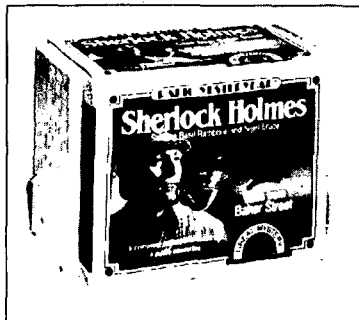
He patted the brown head and said, "Stay," slung the harness over his shoulders, and tested the sprayer for pressure. Too bad no one had invented a selective fungicide for use on the human slime that infested the world.

Down through the orchard row, he could see the top of the old oak looming over the house. Below those ancient limbs, where Shelley could see it from the kitchen door, the mound was still fresh.

Roback drew an arm across suddenly watery eyes and cleared his throat. Really ought to read those damned mixing directions more carefully.

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The Case of the Copped Cockatoo

Albert Bashover

Detective Edgar Snavelly was in his favorite position. His long, thin frame was leaning back in the wood-slatted office chair, legs propped up on the scarred wooden desk. Through half-closed eyes, he watched the smoke curling up from his meerschaum pipe. The morning Florida sun forced its way through the dusty windows, slanted through the old wooden blinds, and highlighted his hawkish profile. Except for his feet, a half-filled bottle labeled "bourbon," an ashtray filled with cigarette butts, and a telephone, the worn desktop was bare. It was a picture of Sherlock Holmes semi-asleep in Sam Spade's office.

Incongruous, but that was the effect Edgar wanted. Edgar's specialty as a detective was deductive reasoning as practiced by his idol, Sherlock Holmes. Unfortunately for Edgar, his clients preferred the crudity of the Sam Spade technique to the subtlety of the reasoned approach. Clients were hard to come by, and though Edgar didn't drink or smoke cigarettes, he felt that presenting the client with the proper ambiance was very important. A needlepoint on the wall behind the desk proclaimed, "No Crime Goes Unsolved When Snavelly's Involved." Below that, a battered frame (he had artfully battered it himself) displayed his investigator's license. Next to that was a framed letter from the Jacksonville police, thanking him for his help in solving the case of the Jacksonville cereal killer and requesting that he apply his deductive reasoning techniques everywhere. Though Edgar had studied criminal psychology for years, he couldn't understand how a person could develop homicidal tendencies towards a breakfast food. An inefficient secretary in Jacksonville had made several errors in typing, including misspelling cereal, and typing "elsewhere" instead of "everywhere." It took a bit of whiteout and retyping, but Edgar had made the corrections.

There was contentment in Edgar's small, thin smile as he listened to the clatter of the antique typewriter in the outer office. Thaddeus Dinsmore, Edgar's young protege, was busy typing up the record of Snavelly's latest exploits. The boy was young and



THE DOOR OPENED, INTERRUPTING THE CAPTAIN'S PROTEST.

inexperienced, but he was a willing worker—willing to work at minimum wage and the promise that he would be taught the principles of deductive reasoning. Suddenly the sound of typing stopped. In a moment, a well-built lad of seventeen with a head of tousled brown hair atop an acne-covered face tentatively entered Snavelly's office.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said. "There's a lady outside who would like to see you about a case. Her name is Edwina Lamore."

Snavelly sighed, put his feet on the floor, and said, "Come in, Thaddeus, and close the door behind you. I think it is time to give you another lesson in deductive reasoning." He stood up, clamped his pipe firmly in his mouth, and clasped his hands behind his back. "You say it is a lady who wishes to see me. Am I correct in assuming that you have reached this conclusion by the usual superficial observation?"

"Well, she looked like a lady, and she was wearing a dress . . ."

"Aha! She was wearing a dress. And no doubt she was carrying a purse."

"Why yes . . ."

"Ah, Thaddeus, Thaddeus," sighed Edgar. "An experienced detective goes beyond simple appearances. Have I ever told you about the case of the Baldheaded Countess? Or the case of the Bogus Bosom? I thought not. You say she told you she is a possible client and wants to see me about a case?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me, Thaddeus, have we had more clients or bill collectors in this office recently?"

"Well . . ."

"And would a bill collector come in here and say he is a bill collector? Of course not. He would say he is a client, and if he is a bill collector who has been unsuccessful in getting to see me in the past, he might try a disguise—he might perhaps dress up as a woman. Things are not always what they seem, young man. Now stop scratching that pimple, and show this so-called lady client in."

Even Snavelly had to be impressed with the disguise. Edwina appeared to be a petite blonde in her well-cared-for middle thirties. Her expensive red dress fitted her so well that any due bill she might have tried to hide, no matter how thin, would have to be hidden in her handbag. She flowed into the dingy office and seated herself in one of the upright chairs facing the desk. From the doorway, Thaddeus's eager eyes followed her every move until she sat

down and crossed her legs. Thaddeus blinked and looked at Edgar.

"You can come in also, Thaddeus," Edgar said. "I would like you to take notes of this meeting. It might be educational for you."

"And now, Ms. Lamore," said Edgar, turning his piercing eyes on the client. "If I may hear your story."

"My problem is that my cockatoo is missing."

"Mmmm?"

"Yes. You see, I recently had to go to Denmark for an operation. I had my cockatoo when I left the United States, but when I returned, I discovered it was gone."

"And that surprised you?" asked Edgar with an arch smile.

"Of course. I had grown very attached to it. I would give anything to have it back."

"I can understand that," said Edgar sympathetically.

"A cockatoo is a parrotlike bird from Australia," offered Thaddeus. "They make very good pets, and . . ."

"I know what a cockatoo is," said Edgar. "Please continue, Ms. Lamore."

"I lent Foo-Foo—that's my cockatoo—and her stand to my next door neighbor, Igor Cranston. Foo-Foo never needed a cage. She would fly around my living room when she wanted to, but she always returned to her bird stand. I was never afraid she would fly away. Igor said he would take care of her while I was away. He seemed like such a nice man. Now they are both gone." She took a tiny handkerchief from her handbag and dabbed it under her eye.

Edgar applied his most comforting smile, but his sharp eyes never lost their inquisitive glint. "I'm sure we can help you, Ms. Lamore. There is a fee, of course . . ."

"It is Miss Lamore now. My husband passed away two years ago and left me with quite a bit of money. I have been well taken care of . . ." Edwina cast a sideways glance at Thaddeus. "At least monetarily. Money will be no problem."

Edgar stood up and reloaded his meerschaum from a tobacco can in the desk drawer. "It would help if you could describe your cockatoo and your neighbor in as much detail as you can. Thaddeus, take notes."

Edwina put her handkerchief in her handbag. "Foo-Foo is all white with a beautiful white crest. She can count to ten. Igor is bald, five foot eight or nine, and can probably count much higher. I made the mistake of telling Igor how valuable Foo-Foo is, but I never expected him to move away while I was gone and take Foo-

Foo with him. He knows how much I loved my cockatoo." Edwina leaned closer to the notetaking Thaddeus so he might more accurately record her words. "I have a lot of love to give, you see, so I lavished all my affections on Foo-Foo. She was all I had at the time."

She looked sadly at Thaddeus. Thaddeus scribbled faster.

"I had circulars printed and passed around the neighborhood asking for the return of my bird," continued Edwina, "but so far I have had no response. Now I feel I must have professional help to find Igor and Foo-Foo."

"Did this Igor Cranston ever tell you what his occupation was?" asked Edgar.

"All Igor ever said about his work was that it had to do with money."

"Mmmm . . ." offered Edgar. He blew a heavily aromatic cloud to the ceiling. "That's not much to go on, but we will do our best. Now if you will return home, Miss Lamore, you can leave your problem in our hands. We will contact you as soon as we have any information."

As soon as the door closed behind Edwina, Edgar turned to Thaddeus, "There is more to this game than meets the eye, Thaddeus. Tell me what you observed about our client."

"Well, she seems to miss her cockatoo . . ."

"Just as I thought. You insist on seeing only the obvious. What about the disguise?"

"The disguise?"

"Of course. It was just about perfect. To anyone but a trained observer, it would appear that an attractive, probably sexually hungry woman was interested in finding a missing cockatoo."

"That's what she said . . ."

"But Edwina—perhaps I should call him Edwin—made one glaring mistake. Did you notice how she appeared particularly interested in you?"

"Well, I . . . I," Thaddeus reddened down to his fingernails.

"I don't want to disparage you, Thaddeus, but let's face it. Why would a woman's amorous intentions be directed to a pimply-faced youth when there was a mature man of obviously superior attributes in the same room? The answer is evident: a younger, inexperienced person can be more easily manipulated."

"Thaddeus, our client does not want us to find a missing cockatoo at all. He probably already has one. Our client wants us to locate Igor Cranston."

"Wow!" said the awestruck Thaddeus. "I would have never figured . . ."

"Don't be disheartened, Thaddeus. It takes years of training to be able to think as I do. Now we must work fast. Follow Edwin, or Edwina if you prefer it that way. Don't let him out of your sight. I don't know what this transvestite's game is, but we will find out. Stay with him until you see the lights in his apartment go out, then report to me. I am going to see my old friend and brother-in-law Captain LeStreet at the police department. He may be able to give us some information on this Igor Cranston."

Ocean Beach is a small, incorporated town on the Florida coast. Normally the Ocean Beach Police Department is a quiet place. The usual police activity is dispensing speeding tickets to tourists and occasionally stopping two eighty-year-old retired accountants from fighting over a parking space. On this day, however, the place was buzzing. There had been an attempted robbery at the Bloomingsax department store, and a guard had been wounded.

Captain James LeStreet was a small man with a roly-poly body and a matching round, florid face. His white hair, which usually stood up like two pointed horns on either side of his balding head, was flattened with perspiration. He was trying to simultaneously answer a phone call from the city council president, interrogate a witness, and get a report from a patrolman. The second phone on his desk started ringing just as Edgar walked in.

"Oh no. Not you, Edgar. Not today!" Captain LeStreet wiped his head with a crumpled, damp handkerchief.

Edgar was used to his brother-in-law's gruff ways. Since LeStreet had married Edgar's sister Dottie, Edgar had been involved in many of his cases. Edgar's help might not have been outwardly appreciated, but he knew that underneath Captain LeStreet's irascible exterior was a confused little man crying for help. Edgar was always there to help. Dottie made sure of that. Dottie loved her little brother and insisted, under threat of connubial disharmony, that her husband use Edgar's talents.

It was a two-way street. Edgar knew that he could always expect any help he needed from the Ocean City Police captain. On this day, he had come to get information about Igor Cranston, but one glance at the excited confusion of the police captain's office indicated to Edgar that this was one of those times when LeStreet

needed the calm, incisive mind of detective Edgar Snavelly more than Edgar needed him.

"I was going to ask you for some information on a certain character that I am investigating, James, but I see that you are quite busy at the moment. Perhaps if you could tell me a little about the problem you are working on, I might be of some assistance."

Captain LeStreet opened his mouth to express in no uncertain terms the manner in which Edgar might best be of assistance to his police department, but then he had the quick picture of his returning home that evening to a less than happy Dottie. He took a deep breath, dismissed the others from his office, and dutifully started his explanation to the attentive Edgar.

"There has been an attempted robbery of a bank truck that was picking up the day's receipts at the delivery dock of Bloomingsex department store. Several employees had noticed a suspicious looking man casing the delivery dock for the past couple of days and had reported it to management. The manager of Bloomingsex is a friend of mine, and he asked me to look into it. I had some shopping to do for Dottie anyway, so I personally went to Bloomingsex yesterday to investigate the problem. At the loading dock, I observed a 'John Doe' across the street, acting suspiciously, but he didn't break any laws so I just made a note of it and continued my shopping. This afternoon an attempt was made to rob the bank truck at the Bloomingsex loading dock by an armed man. The bank truck guard pulled his gun, but not fast enough. The perpetrator fired, and fled without getting any money. The guard was badly wounded, however."

Edgar was perplexed. "There doesn't seem to be a problem here, James. This 'John Doe' was seen by the guard, by several employees, and even by you. It would seem that there would be no problem in apprehending him."

"You would imagine so," grunted the exasperated captain, "except that each witness described the suspect differently. The guard said an elderly greyhaired man wounded him, the employees saw a youngish blond man at the loading dock, and I saw a balding middle-aged man watching the bank truck. There seem to have been three men involved, yet the actual robbery attempt was made by only one person."

"Mmmm," murmured Edgar. He took his meerschaum out of his pocket and loaded it. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"I would rather you didn't."

"I see where a bit of deductive reasoning is needed here," said Edgar as he lit up and exhaled a blue-grey cloud. "The answer to your problem is quite clear if you can cut through the deceptive haze of the obvious."

"Yes, cutting through the haze is a problem," coughed the captain, waving ineffectively at the approaching fog.

"Your John Doe is obviously just one person but one who is a master of disguise," continued Edgar. "He is cleverly using this ability to appear as what he is not. Therefore, I would suggest that you look for what you did not see."

"Huh?"

"This criminal went to a great deal of trouble to look like three different men; therefore, it would not surprise me if the next time you see him he will confuse you once again by looking completely different. I suggest, dear brother-in-law, that you look for a woman—a 'Joan Doe.'"

"A woman?"

"Yes. It is the obvious conclusion to the mind trained in deductive reasoning."

"Edgar, your mind never ceases to amaze me."

"It takes training, James. And now that I have been of some help to you, I hope you will return the favor by giving me some information. I am looking for a man named Igor Cranston. I have a client who believes he may have stolen a cockatoo."

"A cockatoo?"

"Yes. It is a white parrotlike bird that . . ."

"I know what a cockatoo is, Edgar. I was just surprised that you were looking for one. It just so happens that we've received a call from the owner of the Florida Feathered Friends pet store. He said that a man had tried to sell him an expensive cockatoo under suspicious circumstances. The man had no papers of ownership and appeared very nervous. He said he had found the bird and knew it was valuable. The pet store owner wouldn't buy it, of course, and suggested that the man find the owner, possibly receiving some small reward, or perhaps sell it privately."

Captain LeStreet hated it when he was able to help Edgar. It only meant that now Edgar would feel it was necessary for him to reciprocate.

"Thank you very much for that information, James," said Edgar as he curled another wreath of blue-grey Turkish smoke around the captain's rubefacient face. "And I think I may be able to repay

you with some useful information of my own. As I pointed out before, you should be looking for a master of disguise who will probably be posing as a woman. At this moment my assistant Thaddeus has been assigned to trail someone who might be the very person you are looking for."

Captain LeStreet put up a defensive hand. "Thank you for the help, Edgar, but I think my police are capable of developing their own leads."

"Oh, I'm sure they are, James. In any case I will keep you informed if anything more develops."

"Thanks heaps, Edgar. Now if I can get back to work . . ."

The next morning, Edgar heard the typewriter chattering away as he was climbing the stair to his office. Thaddeus was already hard at work typing up his report on the previous night's activities.

"I'll be done in a minute, Mr. Snively," said the eager Thaddeus.

"Why don't you come into my office and give me an oral report in the meantime," suggested Edgar.

Thaddeus stopped typing and followed Edgar. "After Miss Lamore left here yesterday, she went shopping at the Publix supermarket. She bought a head of lettuce, a carton of milk—two percent fat—"

"I'm not interested in her shopping list, Thaddeus. Tell me where he, or she, went. Did he contact anyone?"

"I'm sorry to report, Mr. Snively, that she spotted me in the parking lot of the supermarket. I tried to tell her it was just a coincidence that I was there, that I was on my way home to my mother. Miss Lamore said she lived all alone in this big apartment, and she needed someone big and strong to help her carry her groceries. I really couldn't say no, so I went with her."

"Very good, Thaddeus. So you actually got into his, I mean her, apartment. Did you get a chance to look into any of the clothes closets? Was there anything there that was, shall we say, out of the ordinary?"

"I really couldn't say, Mr. Snively. You see, just as she invited me into her apartment, her phone rang. She was beginning to make me feel very uncomfortable, so when she went in to answer the phone, I put the groceries down and left."

Edgar sat down in his swivel chair with a disappointed look. "Ah, Thaddeus," he sighed. "You have a long way to go before you are able to fill the boots of any great private investigator. You had

the perfect opportunity to find out what our client was about, and you muffed it."

The phone on Edgar's desk jangled loudly. Edgar picked it up before the reproved Thaddeus could get back to his own desk to answer it and heard the satin voice of Edwina Lamore.

"I'm so glad I caught you, Mr. Snavelly. I received the oddest phone call last night. A Miss Snodgrass called to tell me that she had seen one of the circulars I had distributed. She told me that a man she knew had sold her a cockatoo just yesterday for one thousand dollars. From the description in my circular, she believed it to be my Foo-Foo. She said she would return it to me, but I would have to reimburse her for the money she paid for the bird."

"It is possible that this 'Miss Snodgrass' is telling the truth," said Edgar. "It is also possible that Miss Snodgrass is an accomplice of your friend Cranston, and this is his way of getting money for the bird without showing up himself. He might be afraid that you would have him arrested for birdnapping."

"You are so clever, Mr. Snavelly. But what shall I do? I do want my Foo-Foo back. She is very valuable to me."

Edgar thought for a moment. "Do you have a telephone number so that you might get in touch with Miss Snodgrass? . . . Good. Call her and have her bring the bird to my office tomorrow at precisely nine A.M.

"I would like you to be here also, Miss Lamore, with the one thousand dollars. If Miss Snodgrass's story is true, it will cost you a thousand dollars, but you will have your bird. If her story is not true, with some discreet questioning I should get a lead as to where we can find Igor Cranston."

"Do you think this Miss Snodgrass has Miss Lamore's bird?" asked Thaddeus when Edgar had hung up the phone.

"All will be revealed in time," said Edgar. "Not only will Edwina Lamore and Miss Snodgrass be here tomorrow, but I will also invite a surprise guest, my friend police captain James LeStreet. We should have a very interesting get-together."

A none-too-happy Captain LeStreet was the first of the guests to arrive at Edgar's office the next morning.

"I don't know what I'm doing here, but Dottie insisted I stop off on my way to work. What's going on, Edgar?"

"I won't keep you long, James. I am having a particular person here in a little while. I thought you might want to be here to see

if you would recognize her—or him—as a participant in the Blooming-sax shooting.”

“Her? Him? Are you still on that disguise kick? I told you it was a man that we all saw. If that’s what you asked me here for . . .”

The door opened, interrupting the captain’s protests. A tallish woman, about forty, with fiery red hair piled high on her head and wearing an orange two-piece suit, walked in. She carried a brown purse in her left hand, and in her right hand she carried a black bird stand topped with a crossbar. A string on the crossbar was tied to the leg of a large white cockatoo perched there.

“Hello. I’m Miss Snodgrass. I’m to meet a Miss Lamore here,” she said.

“Come in,” said Edgar. “I am Edgar Snavelly. This is my assistant, Thaddeus Dinsmore, and the other gentleman is Captain LeStreet of the Ocean City Police Department.”

Miss Snodgrass’s jaw noticeably tightened. “What is the law doing here? I am just a good citizen doing her duty by returning someone’s property. I’m doing nothing illegal.”

“Have no fear, Miss Snodgrass,” soothed Edgar. “We are all here for the same reason: to meet Miss Edwina Lamore.”

As if on cue, the door opened once again, and Edwina Lamore entered.

“Foo-Foo!” she cried as soon as she saw the bird.

At the sound of her name, the bird spread her wings, which seemed to fill the room, and leaped from the stand in the direction of Edwina. Unfortunately for Foo-Foo, the cord securing her leg to the bird stand pulled taut. The bird made a sudden, unplanned mid-air U-turn, which caused her to crash-land on Miss Snodgrass’s hair. As a result, the bird, the stand, and Miss Snodgrass’s bright red hair fell to the floor of the office. There was a split second of silence as everyone stared at the melange of black bird stand, white bird, and red hair on the floor. Snodgrass was busy trying to hide “her” bald head with his purse.

“The Blooming-sax shooter!” exclaimed Captain LeStreet.

“Igor Cranston!” cried Edwina.

Snodgrass, née Cranston, tried a quick turn to make a hasty exit through the office door but was hampered by a too-tight skirt. He was brought to the floor with a flying tackle by the quick acting Thaddeus. Captain LeStreet, who moved pretty quickly for a short, overweight cop, helped Thaddeus push Cranston into a chair, and the two of them held him there.

"Edgar, call my office and tell them to send a car and a couple of uniforms," puffed Captain LeStreet. "I don't know how you did it, Edgar, but you certainly came through this time."

Stony-faced, Edgar reached for the phone with his right hand and his meerschaum with his left. He would need a little calming nicotine before he would be able to explain things to the captain.

The smell of the meerschaum's smoke was killing LeStreet, but he couldn't help but smile at Edgar, who was sitting in his office across the desk from him. The local newspaper had proclaimed LeStreet a hero for catching the Blooming'sax shooter so quickly, and Dottie had promised him a celebration sauerbraten for dinner that night. The only thing that could make life better was for Edgar's next case to take him to New Zealand.

"I knew immediately, of course, that Snodgrass was not a woman," explained Edgar. "It was a simple matter of deduction. No real redheaded woman would wear an orange dress and carry a brown purse. The colors are all wrong." He watched the smoke from his meerschaum curl lazily upward from his pipe, only to get caught and ripped apart in the slowly revolving fan blades above the captain's desk. "Now, the gender of the other party, Edwina Lamore, is another matter. Edwina claimed to be so femininely upset at what happened in my office that she asked, in fact insisted, that Thaddeus accompany her and Foo-Foo home. That was the chance I was waiting for. As they left I whispered to Thaddeus to check out Edwina Lamore's apartment thoroughly, and not to return until he knew for sure that she was what she pretended to be."

A buzz from the intercom on the captain's deck preceded a nasal announcement that a Mr. Thaddeus Dinsmore would like to see the captain and Mr. Snavelly. The captain asked the secretary to let him in.

"Well, Thaddeus," said Edgar as the young man entered, "I hope you did a more thorough job this time."

Thaddeus blushed and looked at the floor. "I did my best, Mr. Snavelly."

"And you are now convinced that Edwina Lamore is indeed a woman?"

"She sure is," said Thaddeus.

"What makes you so sure?"

"Well, I had to stay all night to do it, but as you suggested, I checked absolutely everything."

"Very good, young man. You are still young and inexperienced, of course, but I must admit that you now seem to understand that thoroughness is essential in our business. Stick with it, Thaddeus. With a little more maturity you might make a good detective. By the way, do I imagine it, or is your face clearing up a bit?"

(continued from page 4)

Systems Division of General Dynamics; her earlier jobs included managing a singing telegram company and being the lead singer in a rock and roll band.

Ms. Rogers, a Houstonian, mother of four, grandmother of seven, is an executive assistant who has published several non-fiction articles and co-authored two books. She tells us that she "wrote marketing materials for small businesses, tried magazine writing . . . but didn't like it, then tried fiction and loved it. Still do."

All the contest winners will be presented with cash prizes at the upcoming Edgar Week festivities in New York in April, during which time MWA holds its annual awards banquet.

The winners in the published writers category: Peter Lovesey, first place; Perri O'Shaughnessy, second place; and Susan B. Kelly, third place.

The judges were author Edward D. Hoch and editors Sara Ann Freed (*The Mysterious Press*) and Janet Hutchings (*Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*). Those three stories can be found in the June issue of EQMM.

In the June 1993 issue of AHMM, we published a delightful narrative poem about an unwitting serial killer titled "King José's Hobby" by Linda Paul. We are now pleased to report that King José's further adventures are detailed in this issue as "King José's Hobby, Part II." If you missed the first one, don't let that keep you from reading the second one: Ms. Paul will catch you up nicely.

Finally, we have two more new authors to introduce. Or rather one to introduce and one to reintroduce.

(continued on page 67)

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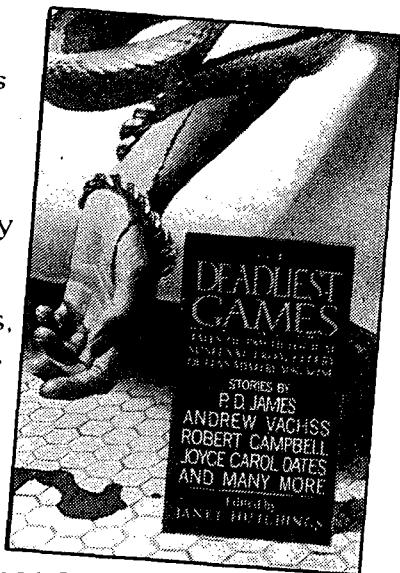
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065 AH

Blood Stripe

William J. Carroll, Jr.

The snowman was watching Mount Hood as if waiting for the dawn, with his head tipped slightly forward and leaning a little to the right, and as I jogged past the lookout point and the bench on which the snowman was sitting, I remember thinking that it must have taken a bit of work because the general anatomical detail—the size, shape, and attitudes of the head, trunk, and limbs—was unusually good.

Kids, I thought, but older ones. Clever ones. Maybe an artist among them.

Like Sandy.

Who did watercolors and played the violin and even wrote poetry . . .

Never mind!

I jogged on past the lookout, puffing steam, and determinedly put my thoughts back on keeping my pace steady.

I was moving downhill in semidarkness, a mile already from the cabin with another easy mile to the ranger station on the other side of Mount Fear. Then it was back and uphill all the way. I'd made the same run three days in a row

and knew that finishing depended on my pacing myself on the downhill leg. I wanted to finish, so I shortened my stride and watched the road ahead, feeling pretty good just then, barely straining, wanting a cigarette but knowing I could do without. . . . I'd quit a month ago.

Not for any of the usual, common-sense reasons people have for quitting, but I did quit and was past the edgy, craving stage and into a more relaxed, wouldn't-a-cigarette-go-good-right-now phase that I could handle with my eyes closed. I just kept going, watching my street-light shadow emerge, lengthen, and disappear under my feet, then reappear, lengthen, and . . .

I wondered what Sandy was doing.

With her girlfriends down on the California Baja—she'd still be in bed, probably, dreaming young dreams, thinking nothing of me . . .

Never mind!

I pounded on, listening and watching for traffic as I ran because the narrow mountain

road had just been plowed and the waist-high drifts on either side had made the road even narrower.

It was 0620 when I made the ranger station, where I turned around and started back up the way I'd come, the real punishment of my run ahead of me, asking myself every step of the way just what the hell I thought I was doing.

I was on leave, for God's sake. Should be on a beach somewhere, relaxed and breathing easy.

But there I was, running up a mountain in the dead of winter, in total body agony and breathing like a steam engine . . .

I had no good answer for myself.

Something about turning over a new leaf, though. Making myself over. Becoming—I don't know—a little less self-indulgent, a little more self-denying; a little less content with things as they were, a little more willing to risk what I was—or something.

The Winter of Virginiak's Discontent?

No good answer, like I said, but . . .

It had something to do with Sandy.

I could never kid myself for very long about anything, and this was the no-mercy truth of

it, even if I couldn't find the words to make the connection between what I was doing to myself and . . .

Never mind!

I kept running.

Focused my eyes hard on the road at my feet, ignored the stitches in my back and side, the heaviness in my thighs, the stinging in my lungs, and kept moving, feeling the sweat start to puddle inside my clothes, thinking I was probably daring pneumonia, but knowing I wasn't going to stop until . . .

The lookout loomed on my left, and I crossed the road to give the snowman a closer look because it had been well done and because it would take my mind off the pain for a second or two. Dawn was just beginning to break over Mount Hood in the east, and that in itself was worth a look. I was ten feet away from the bench when it finally hit me.

This was no snowman.

I came to a breath-heaving stop, took a moment to gather myself, then walked around to the front of the bench, squatted down, and peered up into the snow-frosted face of a dead man.

After a short, silent debate, I jogged back down to the ranger station to call the po-

lice. It was a bit closer than my cabin, and an easier run. There were a couple of houses in the general area, but there seemed no pressing reason to disturb anyone else's early morning—the dead man was in no need of immediate attention.

So the ranger station it was. I made the call, then hiked back up to the lookout where the body still waited, its head tilted in a questioning attitude, and I waited with it, wondering what the question could have been.

Ten minutes later, a large black Land Rover sporting the logo of the Big Pine County Sheriff's Department turned off the highway and stopped, and a deputy sheriff got out.

He noted the body, took a brief statement from me, asked a few short questions, told me I'd have to wait for the sheriff, then called for help, which arrived a little less quickly—another Land Rover, with more deputies and the black sedan of the county coroner, who began a lightfingered examination of the body.

I was asked a few more questions—actually the same ones—by one of the new deputies. A few more cars arrived—a reporter and a couple of gawkers—so the deputies left me alone and busied themselves keeping those people back, and

then an ambulance pulled in and another sedan with four more deputies.

One of them cordoned off the area of the lookout with crime scene tape; one took pictures of the body, the bench, and the general area; one began a more heavy-handed examination of the corpse; and one asked me the same questions I'd answered twice before.

I was feeling chilled by then, and was getting a little irritated. I wanted to leave, but when I said so to the deputy, he said I'd have to wait for the sheriff, who was on the way, sorry for the inconvenience, and thanks for your patience.

Which left me stamping my feet and shivering and getting even more irritated for nearly half an hour.

I was just about to tell them I was leaving and the hell with it when somebody said, "Here's the sheriff now."

I looked where everyone else looked and saw a black, tinted window Trans Am turn into the lookout, pull over beside the ambulance, gun its engine once, and stop.

Finally!

The driver's side door sprang open, and after a second or two, a tall woman wearing a black Stetson, sunglasses, a wool parka, bluejeans, and brown al-

ligator cowboy boots got out and looked straight at me.

I came away from the lookout rail where I'd been standing and took a couple of steps in her direction because I wanted to get this over with fast, but stopped when she took off her glasses and grinned at me.

"Mr. Virginiak?" she said.

I gave her a face-placing frown—blonde, blue-eyed, tanned, freckled, mid-thirtyish face, good straight features. I took a step closer, then I had her name. "Captain Dilly!" I said with a laugh.

She came over to where I stood, and we shook hands.

"I'll be damned," she told me. "Small world."

"It is that," I agreed. "It's good to see you."

Dilly, Loretta, Captain, USAR.

Nearly three years now since I'd seen her last, and she looked quite the same except for the change of uniform.

Which was pretty damned good, actually.

During the Gulf War build-up, she'd been one of three reserve officers we'd gotten as replacements assigned to the 40th Army Counterintelligence Office at Fort Lewis. Of the three, and looks aside, she'd been the only one worth remembering.

She'd only worked for us a short while—not very much longer than the war itself—so I didn't get to know her well, but she'd struck me as better-than-usual reservist material. I'd liked her and had been sorry when she was deactivated.

"You look different out of uniform," I told her, tapping the eight-pointed silver star on her jacket. "And it's Sheriff Dilly, eh?"

"That's right," she said archly, "so mind yourself. What are you doing here anyway?"

"I'm on leave," I told her. "I've rented a cabin up the road."

"Fear Mountain Lodges?" she asked in a mildly surprised way.

I nodded. "I was just out for a run this morning when I came across that." I waved at the body on the bench.

She nodded to one of the deputies who was hovering nearby.

He came forward shaking his head. "I don't know what this is, sheriff. No wallet. No I.D. A hundred and twenty and change in his jacket pocket."

"Not robbery, then," she said.

"Nope."

"Anyone know who he is?"

"Not so far."

She started toward the bench.

"There's a good couple of inches of snow covering him,"

the deputy continued, "so we know the body's been here at least eight or nine hours. It didn't start snowing up here until after ten last night, and it stopped around midnight." He waved a hand at the coroner, who stood patiently near the body. "Dave says he can't see any obtrusive marks on the body, but he can't be sure until he gets it into the lab."

Dilly squatted down in front of the frozen corpse and looked into his face. "Indian?" she said.

"Or Mexican," the deputy suggested.

"Or Asian," I offered.

She examined the body's jacket, a thin windbreaker, stood up, and shook her head. "Looks like he just sat down and died."

Dilly started giving orders then, brisk, sensible commands that got the crime scene work finished, the body bagged and on its way to the morgue, and several deputies on their way to question residents in the area.

She gave a brief statement to the reporter, who wanted and got her picture. When the last gawker had gone, she turned back to me and asked if I wanted a lift.

"So," I said, once we were under way, "I seem to recall you

were with the Portland P.D. when you got called up."

Dilly nodded. "I quit to come up here about a month after I was separated from the army. I was senior deputy when the old sheriff died last month, so..." She shrugged.

"Blood stripe," I said.

She laughed. "It may only be temporary," she said. "They're holding a special election in three months."

"And you'll be running?"

"Oh, I'll be running, all right, but people around here have fixed ideas about what a sheriff is, and it isn't female." She paused. "It's more like Attila the Hun in cowboy boots."

I laughed. "So change their minds," I suggested.

"I'm doing what I can, but..." She changed the subject to a "whatever-happened-to-what's-his-name" and "is-so-and-so-still-around" routine that lasted until we reached the entrance of Fear Mountain Lodges, an array of log-walled, big-windowed cabins deployed over several acres of pine-decorated mountainside. I directed her over the road that switch-backed up the south face of the mountain and led to my cabin.

"You up here for the skiing?" she asked.

"That was the plan," I told her. "A friend of mine was supposed to come up here with me

and give me some lessons, but that didn't work out." I shrugged. "My deposit on the cabin was nonrefundable, so I just came ahead on my own. I've got two more weeks here. I figure I'll try out one of the ski schools if they get an opening."

"Look," she said, "we'll need you to come in to make a formal statement."

"No problem."

"This afternoon?"

I told her I'd be there and started out of the car, but she stopped me with a hand on my arm. "It really *is* nice seeing you again."

"Same here," I told her.

"I mean it," she said in a way that was semi-invitational.

I gave her a smile and said, "So do I," in a way that was semi-accepting.

Once in my cabin, I took a long, hot shower, made a pot of decaf in the small kitchenette, then sat and watched the view outside my window for a couple of hours, drinking pointless coffee and wondering, among other things, if I really should be as glad to see Dilly as I was.

In my usual frame of mind, it wouldn't be something I'd give a lot of thought to, but I was not in my usual frame of mind.

I was, in fact, in an unusual frame of mind—my head full of odd worries and doubts, unset-

tling ideas about my life that I was having a hard time living with—so I did.

Give it a lot of thought, that is, and what I decided was that I couldn't decide.

It seemed too fast, somehow. Too quick. I needed some time yet. Time to readjust. Time to get my head right. Time to get things in perspective.

But then . . .

Loretta Dilly was a very handsome woman.

And I *was* on leave, after all. I should be enjoying myself. Going with the flow. Having a good time. So what is your problem, Virginiak? Go for it. Take the plunge. Get back on the horse. Make hay while the sun shines. . . .

But then . . .

And on and on, around and around, I got nowhere. About eleven o'clock, sick of myself, I got dressed.

Black cashmere sweater, gray whipcord trousers, white fleece-lined windbreaker, and a pair of soft black leather boots—all new to accoutre the new me.

Whoever or whatever I thought I was.

Then I took a stroll down the hill, past other cabins with their Volvos and BMW's and Lexuses (Lexi?) parked out front, down to the highway where a large, rambling struc-

ture served as a combination office, sundry shop, restaurant, bar, and ski school.

I made it to the restaurant, where other men—mostly younger than I but dressed in rather the same way—and women, dressed a lot like Sandy would have been, sat and chatted over their meals in the same muted, churchlike tones—and there were no children.

I sat by myself, of course, and had the vegetarian special—a cup of celery soup and a tofu and beansprout sandwich; then I put myself and a cup of herbal tea on the second floor observation deck where I watched the broad, smooth expanse of snow-carpeted mountainside that was the southwest face of Mount Fear being slowly scarred by the long, crisscrossing trails of the dozens of skiers who were out that day—and wondered, for the umpteenth time that week, what I was doing there.

Fear Mountain Lodges.

In my usual frame of mind, I would have forfeited my deposit and stayed home as soon as I found out I was going to be stood up. It hadn't been my idea to come here in the first place. It had been Sandy's—she'd been here before—and I'd even balked a little because I knew I'd feel out of place, but

I went along, finally, and then . . .

Well, in my usual frame of mind I would have just written it all off, but again, I wasn't and I hadn't, so there I was in a sort of yuppie winter haven that was costing me an arm and a leg and was way too rich for my blood, not my kind of place at all even if I did ski.

At least it wasn't usually my kind of place, but then—maybe—now it was.

I didn't know.

I'd quit smoking, started running, and sworn off caffeine and red meat, and I didn't know the why behind those changes either.

I was becoming a mystery to myself.

I went on fretting about this and that and a thousand other things until I decided it was time to go to town, but to put myself in my place or something, I hiked back up to my cabin first where I put on my uniform, then walked back down to the highway.

I didn't think I'd need to call for a cab because there was usually one parked outside the motel's restaurant. It was there now, the driver lounging against the door reading a newspaper and smoking.

"You working?" I asked him.

"Better believe it," he told me, popping open the back seat door for me, then scurrying around to his side and getting in himself. "Where to?" he asked.

"Big Pine."

"Big Pine," he echoed as he put the car in gear and started down the mountain. "Big Pine," he said again as if enjoying the feel of the words in his mouth.

When we'd gone a short way he squinted into the rear view mirror and asked, "You a war-rant officer?"

"That's right," I said.

He hmphed. "Never could get army ranks straight," he said. "Did my twenty in the Corps."

"Really."

"God's truth," he told me, then put a hand back over the seat for me to shake. "Name's McConnel. Call me Mac."

I shook his hand.

Mac was a short, compact little man, mid-fortyish, with his brown hair cut in a military crew. His face was a mask of outdoorsy wrinkles, and his eyes were sharp, darting things that looked like they didn't miss much.

"You on leave?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."

"Ski?"

"I'd planned on trying to."

He shook his head. "Don't ski myself," he told me. "But it's a

great place for it, God's truth—lookit that view."

I looked where he pointed. "You from around here, Mac?"

"Bonnevillie," he replied. "That's up north here about thirty miles or so. When I got out, I decided I seen enougha the world, y'know? So I came back."

He followed the pine-walled highway through some turns. "Beautiful country up here."

"It is," I agreed.

He sighed. "Been driving this hack since '85."

"Really."

"God's truth. Retirement money's good, but I been putting some away to open a bar."

"Oh?"

"Yep. Just about there, too."

He made another turn that set us on the long series of switchbacks that would take us down to the foothills of the mountain. He was quiet while negotiating them. Once we were out of the switchbacks, he said. "Yep. Can't drive a hack forever. Always wanted my own bar." He flicked a glance at me in the rear view. "People figure a guy drivin' a hack don't make hardly nuthin', but I'll tell you somethin' soldier to soldier."

I put an interested look on my face.

"I bring down close to four, five thousand a month in winter."

"Really."

"God's truth. I figure another five; six months I can put a hundred thou down on a little place just southa town I know about. Get her fixed up." He grinned at me in the mirror. "Gonna call it Mac's Tavern."

I nodded and smiled and listened while he yammered on, down through the small foothills and into the valley, where the road angled back toward Mount Fear, giving us a spectacular view.

"This really is God's country, pal," Mac told me with a Chamber of Commerce sincerity. "Believe it."

I told him I would, but, after he entered the outskirts of the town, I had some doubts.

Big Pine was not so much a town as a collection of familiar franchise shops crowded along both sides of the highway at the base of the mountain. As Mac drove us along Main Street, past stores with names that echo in shopping malls in every corner of the country, I had a familiar, wistful sense that I was seeing a kind of retailing virus that was growing out across America, killing the hometown feel to places like Big Pine.

Mallitis americanus or something.

Higher up along the mountainside I could see the princi-

pal residential area—small, wood-framed houses, uniformly white and crowded by pine. Compared to Main Street, they looked like part of the natural landscape.

"So where do I drop ya?" Mac asked.

"Sheriff's office."

At the end of Main Street he parked in front of a newish single-storied building that advertised itself as the Big Pine Sheriff's Station.

He told me the fare, which I paid. As I got out, he nodded toward the building and said, "You have some trouble or something?"

"I hope not," I said. "I found a body this morning, up on the lookout on the other side of the mountain."

He gave me an open-mouthed stare. "A body?"

"God's truth," I told him.

Loretta met me in the large, busy outer office of the sheriff's station and led me down a hall to her own office, where she told me to have a seat. She picked up a phone and ordered a stenographer while I looked the place over.

It took some looking.

It was a big, windowless room, pine-paneled and -floored in glossy hardwood, but as big as it was, it was

made close by the furnishings: a large oak desk with black leather chairs behind and in front; wall-mounted animal heads, mostly of protected species; framed photographs of men with their feet on dead prey; flags in two corners; and guns of every type and calibre, in and out of cases, everywhere—a combination trophy room and armory.

Daniel Boone and George Patton would have felt right at home.

"Nice office," I said to Dilly when she hung up.

She laughed and made a face. "Sheriff Barrel was a man's man. I haven't had much of a chance to give it my imprint."

"Sheriff Barrel?"

She lightly slapped the arms of the chair in which she was sitting. "He died right in this chair," she told me. "Heart attack."

"You look right at home."

She missed the irony. "The County Council doesn't think so. Not that they had much choice in appointing me acting sheriff."

"They were reluctant?"

"Reluctant!" She laughed. "I had to tell them I'd sue them silly if they didn't."

"What are your chances of keeping the job?"

"Slim." She frowned at a spot in space over my head. "I have to show them I can be . . ."

The stenographer came in just then, and Dilly led me through a short, businesslike Q and A. When the steno had departed to type up my statement, I said, "Any luck in identifying the body?"

"Not yet, but sooner or later we'll get a line. The autopsy will be done this afternoon." She smiled. "Um . . . this—friend of yours. The one who was going to teach you to ski?"

"Sandy," I said, "Something came up, and she couldn't make it."

"So—are you going steady or something?"

"No. You?"

"Married to the job."

I nodded. "Well . . ." I said, but I got no further.

Dilly sat and smiled steadily at me.

And after a very long moment, I laughed and said, "Nice office."

The stenographer came back then, and I signed three copies of my statement. When she'd left again, there was a mixed feel to things, and I started feeling foolish.

"Well, I guess I'll leave you to it," I said, making getting up motions.

"What are you doing tonight?" she asked.

I shrugged and said, "This is your town, Loretta."

So we made some plans, dinner and whatever that night; then I left and spent the next hour or so strolling through the town, popping in and out of stores that had that familiar franchise feel to them, trying not to overthink my situation, trying not to think about the what ifs and maybes and whys that circled inside my head like birds of prey.

But in one of the stores I entered, I saw a girl who reminded me of Sandy.

So much so, in fact, that I furiously followed her for a short while until I thought I might frighten her. I quit it, telling myself to grow up.

But I strolled on, enjoying the fresh, high-country air. After making a turn or two, I eventually found the real town of Big Pine.

Or what had to have been the old town, a block behind what had become the new main street, on the mountain side of the highway. It was a dead area of boarded-up buildings with dilapidated signs like Bill's Hardware, Dave's TV & Appliances, and Bea's Luncheonette hanging every which way in sad neglect.

I caught a look at myself in the dark, dirty window of what

had been Mel's Grocery, and despite the new me, I had the chicken-skin feeling I was home.

Which did little to lighten my mood.

After another half hour's walk, I took a mountain shuttle bus back to my cabin and spent the rest of the afternoon inside, fretting some more about the wisdom of dating too soon and watching Oprah.

With women who hate their bodies.

Dilly was prompt and looked great in a black dress and white leather jacket. She drove us down off the mountain, through Big Pine and all the way to the outskirts of Portland—which seemed a long way to go for dinner, but this was her neck of the woods so I didn't question it—to a steakhouse she told me was the best in the Northwest. She had an inch thick New York cut, and I had fish.

Which wasn't half-bad.

Later, over coffee (mine decaf, hers straight) and cigarettes (hers Benson & Hedges, mine merely memories), she remarked, "You're more health-conscious than I remember."

"A little," I agreed.

"A little!" she laughed. "You used to smoke like a chimney."

"I quit just recently."

"And ordering fish in a steakhouse," she went on with an amused lilt, "is like asking for smoked baby dolphin hearts in a vegetarian diner."

I laughed.

"I mean it," she said. "You're a lot different now."

I didn't know exactly how to respond, so I didn't. Instead I cocked my head toward the sounds of an electronically assisted country and western band that were coming from another part of the building and asked if she wanted to dance.

Which she did. We followed the music, but the dancefloor was packed, so we took a table and watched while the band performed. When they were done, we danced to a couple of slow ballads from the jukebox.

Back at our table, over a couple of light beers, she said, "I'm having a good time."

"So am I," I told her.

She laughed again shortly, then said, "Would you believe I haven't been out on a date for almost a year?"

I cocked my head. "Why is that?"

"No opportunities," she said without conviction.

"Really."

She made a face, sipped at her beer, then sat back and said, "I've wanted to be in law enforcement all my life. And I have been. My first job after college was with the Portland P.D.—first parking control and then in records." She smiled ruefully. "Meter maid, then clerk."

"I came up here three years ago," she went on, "thinking things would be different, but Barrel had me on radio for the first year. He only let me go out on road patrol after I threatened to sue *him*."

"So," she said. "I learned the lesson. As a woman, if I want to get ahead in this line of work, I have to be more of a man than most men."

I frowned at her. "So—you haven't dated?"

"It would have compromised me," she said. "The image I need to cultivate."

I laughed. "Until I came along and destroyed your will to resist."

She laughed back. "Maybe," she said. "Maybe it's hard keeping up the act."

I sipped at my beer and sat back feeling very relaxed.

"How about you?" Dilly asked.

"How about what?"

"That friend of yours?" she said. "The one who was going to teach you how to ski."

"Oh," I said, putting a small smile on my face. "Sandy."

Loretta nodded expectantly.

I sighed. "Well, she's a lieutenant," I said. "And she's a little young for me, I guess."

"I see."

"I suppose we really never should have gotten involved. So we've . . . decided to call it off."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"No big thing," I told her.

"How do you feel about it?"

I put a mild look of concentration on my face. "I don't really know."

"Why?" Dilly asked.

"Why?"

She opened her mouth to rephrase the question but changed her mind. "Never mind," she said with a smile. "None of my business."

I made myself laugh. "I suppose," I said, "it's because I'm not letting myself think about it."

"Why not?"

"I'm—on leave," I replied stupidly.

"I see," she said. "So, you're just—on cruise control or something?"

"Something like that."

She gave me a knowing kind of look then, and I thought she was going to ask more about it, but thank God, she dropped it.

We chatted a bit more about nothing much at all, but the psychochemistry of our species

was hard at work; so when the place closed, on our way back to her car, Dilly and I held hands, and once we were inside, we kissed, and after we were on the highway, headed toward Big Pine, the sense that things were going too fast for me became acute and I didn't really know what to do about it.

Which is something one expects more from a teenage girl than a forty-three-year-old man, but there it was.

I was confused.

This hadn't been something I'd anticipated. Or rather it hadn't been something I'd thought through. This was crazy. I needed to think about this. I needed to . . .

"I don't know what we're doing," Dilly murmured, half to herself.

"I'm not that certain myself," I admitted.

She glanced at me. "You're a sweet man, Virginiak," she said, putting a hand on my knee.

I took her hand in my own—and felt even more confused.

"So," she said. "What now?"

I was still thinking it over like an idiot—still holding her hand but still thinking it over—when, a mile or so south of Big Pine, Dilly's radio chirped, and she called in.

"We got a 10-11, at Fremont's Leather Shop in town, sheriff,"

a woman's voice told her. "Happened fifteen minutes ago."

"Tell me, Mavis," Dilly ordered.

"Suspect is male," Mavis replied, "Indian, eighteen to twenty years old. About five ten, one seventy-five, black hair. He's wearing a gray sweatshirt, khaki trousers, and a black cloth hat. Last seen heading north down along the old rail line."

"What'd he take?"

"A thousand dollar coat, the owner said. Black leather and seal fur. Said he just came in and grabbed it off a store mannequin and took off."

"Who's responding?"

"Jerry is at the scene, Tom and Frank are cruising down around the old warehouses."

Dilly gave me a questioning look, and I shrugged.

"I'm on the job, Mavis," Dilly told her. "Tell Frank and Tom I'll work up along the old river road toward them."

"Roger that," Mavis replied.

Dilly hung up her mike, then turned to me and said. "A 10-11 is shoplifting, but a thousand dollar pricetag makes it robbery one." She gave me a questioning squint. "You don't mind, do you?"

I told her I didn't, feeling curiously relieved.

About a mile farther on, Dilly turned off the highway, crossed

a bridge, and put us on a snow-covered road that edged a frozen river on the right and a railroad track that ran beside a steep-sided rocky hill on the left.

"If he's come this way, he's trapped himself," she told me as she slowed down and killed her lights. "The river ice won't hold a man's weight, so we should have him boxed."

She drove ahead by moonlight at about fifteen miles an hour, watching the road and track, which curved northwesterly toward Big Pine. The sky was jet black but bright with stars, and a new moon hung over the peaks to the north.

"Should spot him any minute now," she murmured as she inched the Trans Am forward. "Any minute," she repeated softly.

We'd been at it for about five minutes and could just make out the lights of the town about a mile ahead and to the right when the dark figure of a man appeared, hunch-shouldered, walking along the track.

"There he is!" she exclaimed, calling it in on the radio immediately.

The man spotted our car an instant later and started down off the tracks heading toward the iced-over river, but Dilly turned on her brights and stabbed the accelerator, which

effectively cut him off from that route. He turned, got back up on the tracks, and started running back in the direction of town.

We paralleled his progress on the lower road for about a minute, but he stopped suddenly as the lights of two vehicles ahead—Frank's and Tom's, presumably—came into view, one on the tracks, and one on the road ahead of us.

"Stay put, okay?" Dilly told me as she stopped the car. She reached into the glove compartment, bringing out a 9mm Beretta, then gave me a brief smile as she jerked the door open and got out.

The man, who was then about ten yards away, was facing the other two cars and looking indecisive.

"You!" Dilly shouted at him. "Hey, you!"

The man spun around to face her. His eyes were wide and wild.

"You stay right where you are!" Dilly told him with force, pointing the weapon in his direction. "I mean it!"

The man looked left, right, then back at Dilly.

"Kneel down," Dilly told him as she took a couple of steps up the incline. "Put your hands behind your head, and don't do anything stupid."

The man turned in the other direction as Frank and Tom got out of their cars.

"Did you hear me?" Dilly shouted angrily.

The man, who seemed young and scared, looked back at her.

"Kneel down, put your hands behind your head, and don't do anything..."

Stupid! I thought as the young man bolted.

Stupid!

Down off the tracks, he started a slip-sliding run toward the river. Dilly, moving awkwardly in her high heels, stepped over to intercept him, but he was a lot stronger, or a lot more desperate than she probably thought, because he ran straight over her, knocking them both down.

Right, I thought. Great.

I started out of the car, hearing Dilly curse as she struggled with the man on the ground, hearing Frank and Tom shouting things as they charged forward. I'd just made it around the door to the front of the car when the man, not ten feet away, stood up, whirled around, and ran blindly straight toward me.

Probably because the bright lights of the Trans Am were in his face, I don't think he ever saw me because as he blundered in my direction I tripped him easily, sending him face

first in a sprawling heap into a drift of snow, and it was over.

Virginian—Man of Action.

Dilly, who was uninjured, save her dignity and a broken thumbnail, handcuffed the young man roughly, retrieved the coat he'd dropped in their brief struggle, and, despite the fact that it made no sense to me or to her deputies, put both in the back of her own car, telling the deputies that she would handle things from there on. A few minutes later we were back on the highway, headed toward Big Pine.

"Damn," Dilly muttered, sucking her thumb.

"Where are you taking me?" the man in back asked her.

"Where do you think?" she replied angrily.

I heard him take a few sharp breaths. "I don't wanna go to jail," he moaned in a little-boy voice. "Please?"

I looked back at him and saw him holding his head in his hands.

He was young, younger than I first had thought, with long black hair that he wore straight. He was flat-featured, a little pudgy, and very frightened.

"What's your name?" Dilly asked.

"Charley White Hand," he said softly. "I live over in Bull Run."

Dilly looked at me and said, "Reservation." She squinted at him in the rear view mirror. "How old are you, Charley?"

"Eighteen," he said, glancing at me. "I'm sorry."

Dilly snorted.

"I don't wanna go to jail," he moaned again. "Please?"

"Knock it off, Charley."

"Please?"

Dilly gave him a hard look in the mirror. "Well, I'll tell you, Charley," she said. "That's a thousand dollar coat you stole . . ."

"I'm sorry . . ."

"... which is grand larceny . . ."

"I'm so sorry . . ."

"... which is good for three to ten in the state prison."

"Oh God no, please . . ."

"And you've assaulted a peace officer, which in this state means a mandatory three years."

"I'm sorry, okay? I'm really sorry . . ."

"Are you listening to this, Charley?"

He shook his head but he was listening.

"Now, you say you don't want to go to jail," she went on, "but answer me this, Charley."

He blinked at the back of her head.

"Just where the hell," Dilly blurted, "did you *think* you were going to end up?"

"Please . . ."

Dilly made a sound of disgust.

"Please!"

Dilly shook her head.

"The coat was for my grandfather . . ."

She laughed archly. "Very thoughtful of you, Charley."

"He's old," he explained. "He lives up on Raining Ridge. All by himself. It's a cold winter, sheriff. He can't go outside it's so cold. He needed a coat . . ."

"Are you trying to break my heart, Charley?" Dilly asked.

He started to explain further but gave it up and put his face in his hands once again.

He looked even younger then than he had a moment before.

And Dilly looked . . . cold.

Back at the Big Pine sheriff's station, Dilly parked on the street in front, grabbed a nightstick from under her seat, got out, and hauled the young man from the car.

"Please. Please. Please," Charley White Hand moaned, over and over as she started him toward the front stairs.

"Move it, Charley!" she snapped, prodding him in the back with the stick.

I'd gotten out of the car myself by then and followed them.

At the stairs, Charley hung back, and Dilly had to nudge

him a bit more to start him up toward the big glass door.

"Come on. Come on!" Dilly ordered.

And Charley moved, but slowly.

Up the stairs to the door, where just inside, behind a counter, several deputies were waiting with small smiles on their faces.

"Dammit!" I heard Dilly mutter. "Dammittohell!"

Through the door then, and I was a few steps behind, and the young man was still dragging his feet, but putting up no real struggle, into the small reception area.

Where Dilly pushed him forward toward the counter as I turned to close the door . . .

"Goddammit!" Dilly shouted suddenly. "You sonofabitch!"

And I looked back in time to see her, grabbing the boy by his collar, swing him around and bounce him hard against a wall. "You little bastard!" she snarled as she did it again. "You punk!" she growled as she rapped him across the backs of his knees with her nightstick. "You sonofabitch!" she spat as she watched him collapse in a pile on the floor.

"Loretta!" I said sharply.

"Damn," she breathed angrily, standing over him.

"Loretta?" I said again, moving toward her.

She ignored me, glaring down at the boy, nightstick held in a daring-him-to-move-an-inch way.

"Loretta?" I said a final time, close enough now so if she'd made another move on the boy I could have taken that damned stick away.

"Damn," she said again, but the show was over.

She tossed the nightstick clatteringly across the counter. "Book him," she said breathlessly to one of the now unsmiling deputies on the other side. "Robbery one and assaulting a peace officer—and get him out of my sight."

Which they did.

A limp-bodied, whimpering little boy—around the counter, down some stairs, out of sight.

And as they took him away, Dilly, her face flushed, her eyes slightly glazed, looked at me, and some of the shock in my own face reflected suddenly in her own.

Which quickly transformed into a hard, what-do-you-know-about-it look.

Which put me in my place, I suppose.

But settled any confusion I'd felt earlier.

Half an hour later, back in Dilly's Trans Am, on the way up the mountain to my cabin, the relaxed, warm feeling that

had grown up between Dilly and me had evaporated.

The sky had gone to a dull gray-black, heavy with sudden clouds, and it was quite cold now, inside and out. It was a long, quiet drive, all the way.

When we arrived at my cabin, Dilly parked, sagged back in her seat, and said, "So—where were we?"

I looked at her. "Nowhere, I think."

"What do you mean?"

I said, "That kid was really scared."

"So?"

"So, you were pretty damn rough with him."

Her eyes glittered with sudden anger. "Oh?"

I looked back at her, not with any anger of my own but with a genuine question.

"Look," she said grimly. "I'm the law in this county. You know what that means?"

I shrugged.

She sighed. "We don't have a lot of crime up here," she told me. "But what we do have is usually violent, and that means I've got to be somebody that people look to as the damned cavalry. As somebody they can trust to keep them safe, and if that means being a little rough on a perpetrator now and then, that's how it is."

I said nothing, and the air seemed colder.

"I'll tell you something," she continued. "What I did back there at the station will be breakfast gossip around town tomorrow morning, and do you know what they'll be saying?" She nodded with certainty. "They'll be saying, 'Whew. That Sheriff Dilly is one mean bitch, isn't she? Don't want to get on the wrong side of her, no sir. Barrel knew what he was doing when he hired her, I'll say. She might make a good sheriff after all, she might.'"

"So," I said. "When you bounced that little boy off the wall, you were making a political statement, is that it?"

"In more ways than one," she said, in a take-it-or-leave-it way.

I nodded and decided to leave it. And she nodded back and said, "So—I guess we're still nowhere."

I opened the door of the car and stood outside saying, "I have my own problems, Loretta."

"I'll say you do," she muttered angrily.

She gunned her car's engine and spun quickly out of sight, down the road to the highway.

Leaving me standing and staring after her.

Sleep that night was a long time coming, and not as restful as it should have been. The

cabin creaked under the strain of the wind, waking me up half a dozen times, leaving me awake to think about the things I'd wanted to avoid thinking about but now I couldn't.

Something about Dilly reflected something about me, and suddenly a lot of what had mystified and confused me became clear—and I was very uncomfortable with myself.

The Winter of Virginiak's Discontent continued.

In any case, sleep was a hard job that night, but as hard as it was, getting up the next day was even tougher, and when I got up finally, around nine o'clock, a blizzard was blowing its head off outside, so I passed on my morning run, started a blaze going in the fireplace, put myself in a big easy chair in the front room, and spent the day reading.

The Genealogy of Morals.

A book I'd skimmed in college but always intended to reread, and now found almost compelling.

Something about its contempt, its merciless appraisals, struck home again and again, and I couldn't put it down.

And so I passed the day quietly—albeit thinking disparaging thoughts about my bourgeois neighbors. Around five P.M., with a feeling of self-

mockery I couldn't shake, I finally showered, shaved, and got dressed and hiked the two hundred yards or so through a heavy fall of wet snow to the motel restaurant where I had filet mignon, baked potato, broccoli in hollandaise, and a couple of Heinekens.

Which left me feeling, if not quite a "superman," at least not the "sick animal" I'd been.

Dr. Nietzsche's Midlife Crisis Remedy.

After dinner I considered getting mellow in the bar but decided enough was enough for one day—a prudent man takes Nietzsche in small doses, I thought—so I settled for espresso and a local newspaper in the lookout lounge.

Where I read articles about Dilly's arrest of Charley White Hand the night before—which characterized Dilly as "tough," and White Hand as "desperate" and "violent"—and about the efforts of the local law to identify the body I'd found the previous morning—which were characterized as "ongoing" but "lacking results."

Which, aside from a lot of talk about the weather—the promise of snow and the lengthening of the ski season occupying most of the front page—was all the news in Big Pine fit to print.

What else would there be?

Putting aside the paper, I people-watched for another half hour before I started getting bored, making up my mind that if I stayed on the full two weeks I would damn sure rent a car because this was *not* my kind of place and these were *not* my kind of people. Then I hiked back up to my cabin.

Where Dilly, dressed in her sheriff's outfit, was waiting in her car.

"Hi," she said tentatively, getting out as I walked up to her.

I nodded and waved a hand to my door, then led her inside, and once we were there she said, "We've just tentatively I.D.'d the body you found the other day."

"Oh?"

"He seems to be a Vietnamese named Doan. He drove a taxi down in Portland. We found his car in a gully about ten miles north of Big Pine. Wallet and I.D. were in the glove compartment."

"I see."

"I'm on my way to see his wife—to tell her—and bring her in to make a formal I.D." She shrugged. "I thought you might come along, unless you're . . . busy, or . . ."

I told her I'd be glad to tag along.

*

Once in her car and on our way down the mountain, she said, "I feel bad about last night."

"So do I," I admitted.

She sighed raggedly. "I was way out of line."

"Out of control," I said.

She looked at me sharply as if to argue but then nodded. "You're right. Out of control." She shook her head. "I shouldn't have pushed that kid around. I know." She looked at me again. "That's not me, really." She laughed ruefully. "I don't know what I'm doing."

I said, "You're trying to be something you're not."

"I suppose."

"Like me, I guess."

Dilly frowned at me.

I sighed and stared out at the black night world for a moment. "Last night," I said, "I had a good long think about how I feel, and I decided I feel pretty rotten, actually. Sandy is twenty-three," I told her. "About half my age; and . . . it was not a mutually arrived at decision to break up. It was her idea, and the issue was age."

"I'm sorry."

"The thing is," I said, "I'm not so broken up over our breaking up as I am over being so damned old all of a sudden."

"You're not old."

"When you get a look at yourself through the eyes of some-

one twenty years younger, you'll know what I mean."

She thought that over, then said, "Hmmm."

I nodded. "Anyway," I went on, "I've been putting myself through some hoops lately. Trying to make myself over into someone—with a more youthful outlook or something."

She went quiet for a moment, then said, "You quit smoking and turned vegetarian."

"I've also started running, getting in shape . . ."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

"No," I agreed, "but it's a front. A way to kid myself. The point is, I have to learn to live with my age, whatever it is. And you have to live with yourself," I told her. "Be the kind of law officer you are."

"I know," she said with a hint of hopelessness. "But that's the kind of law people around here expect."

"You could change their expectations," I said. "You said before you hadn't made your mark yet. Well, make it."

She laughed. "That's easy to say . . ."

"Loretta, this isn't the nineteenth century, and you're not Wyatt Earp, so quit pretending. Be the *new* sheriff in town."

She had nothing to say to that, and I was done preaching.

so I settled back and let her think.

Loretta drove us into Portland, through a semithriving business section and into a not so thriving semiresidential area where we eventually found the right street of older, two and three story buildings, store-fronted, apartment-topped, with cars parked at every inch of available curb space.

We parked about a block away and walked back, checking the numbers on the buildings. We found the right one at the end of a wide, dead-end alley. Overhead, dark laundry hung from lines that criss-crossed between buildings; it waved like black pennants in some ancient battle in the stormy night sky.

There was the heavy odor of drying squid in the air.

The building we entered was fronted by a small store that advertised fresh fish, but once we were inside and out on the stairs there was some room for doubt about the claim.

"This is not a haunt of the rich and famous," said Loretta as we climbed the stairs.

The second floor hall was narrow and rather dark, and we had to flick lighters before the doors to read the numbers.

The right apartment was at the end of the second floor hall, where, in response to Loretta's knock, the door opened the length of the double chain-lock and a pair of curious brown eyes peered up at us.

"Is your mother home?" Loretta asked the little boy.

Another pair of eyes, these about a foot higher up, came to the door.

"I'm Sheriff Dilly, ma'am." She held her I.D. up to the woman, who frowned at it. "From Big Pine. I'd like to ask you a few questions."

The little boy said something in Vietnamese, and the woman appeared startled. The door closed, there was some whispered conversation behind it, then it opened all the way, and the little boy scampered out and down the hall in his pajamas.

The woman, thirtyish, tiny, dark-haired, and pretty, was holding a sleeping infant against one shoulder. She stood back from the door and nodded and smiled us inside.

The dimly lit studio was small, sparsely furnished, but pin-neat except for the walls, which were covered with the crayon drawings of a child, who might have been one or all of the three children, aged three to six, who were sprawled on a floor mat in front of a flickering

black and white TV, and whose eyes followed Loretta and me as we stepped inside.

The woman said something, and the TV was turned off.

"I'm sorry to bother you, ma'am," Loretta told her, "but do you know a Long Van Doan?"

The woman smiled and shook her head. "No speak," she said, and pointed to the hall.

Loretta smiled and nodded back, then said to me, "How's your Vietnamese?"

Not as good as it had been, but I gave it a try, asking her what Dilly had asked and getting a lengthy reply I only partly understood.

I turned to Loretta. "It's the wife. Her name is Tuyet Le. I didn't catch the rest of what she said. It's been a while."

"Well . . ."

Just then a short, fat woman of about forty bustled into the room from the hall and grinned some gold at us. "Hi!" she said. "I Dao Thi. I help talk, okay."

Loretta said, "Thank you."

Dao Thi pointed to the other woman. "This wife for Long Van Doan. She name Tuyet Le." She then said something to Tuyet Le, who replied with her eyes downcast. "She say she no see husband three, four day now. She say he go out, no come back."

Loretta glanced at me, then back at the fat woman. "Is there someone who can watch the children?" she asked gently. "I think her husband may be dead and I want to take her down to the police station to look at the body."

The woman's eyes got big, but when she told Tuyet Le what Loretta had said, she seemed to take it matter-of-factly.

It was how they always seemed to take it.

As we waited for the fat woman's mother to come to watch the children, however, tears began to leak down over Tuyet Le's cheeks, and they didn't stop for the rest of that night.

An old woman came, and Loretta and I quietly joked with the kids while their mother got ready. The oldest boy, who told us he was seven, looked like a miniature version of the corpse on the Mount Fear lookout bench, only alive—and about to age a lot faster than he should have.

Tuyet Le asked no questions while we were in the apartment, but once the four of us were in the car and on the way out of Portland, she began to talk from the back seat in a low monotone. Loretta asked Dao Thi, who sat beside her, what she was saying.

"Too much," replied the fat woman. "She tell everything happen she and family."

"Tell me."

The woman sighed. "She say, come to United States two year ago. Stay camp in Thailand ten year, then come here two year ago. Whole family, come stay Texas. You know Texas? I have sister stay Texas. She no like, but husband no like come here."

"What else does she say?"

She said something to Tuyet Le, who replied at length. "She say she and husband go stay Texas. He got brother stay Texas, too, but people no like, you know? Get fight all the time. People no like Vietnamese people come stay. Lotta trouble. Somebody set fire his boat." She squawked a question at Tuyet Le, who replied quietly. "She say husband like have fishing boat, but people no like him have. Plenty trouble. Somebody set fire his boat. Tell him get out Texas, or maybe kill him. She say they go move stay San Diego. She have sister stay San Diego. Husband try to drive taxi, but get more trouble. Somebody beat him up, take money all the time. So sad story, you know? Get one baby die in Texas. One baby die San Diego. So sad, you know?"

Loretta glanced at me, then back at the road. "Very sad," she said.

"She say they go move stay San Francisco," the woman went on. "Husband try plenty job, but all the time get trouble. Somebody all the time want cheat him. Want fight with him. Tell him go back Vietnam. Go back Vietnam. All the time."

"Does she say anything about having trouble here?" asked Loretta.

She spoke again with Tuyet Le. "She say they come here last month. She no like come —too cold, you know. She like go back San Diego, but he like come Portland. Drive taxi, and she scared stay San Francisco by herself. She want have restaurant in San Diego. Got plenty restaurant in San Diego. She want have one too, but never enough money to start. Husband want to save money for buy restaurant, but so hard, you know?" She spoke some more with Tuyet Le, then made sounds of exasperation. "You know what she say?"

"What?" Loretta asked.

Dao Thi sighed. "She say no have insurance, so what she gonna do now, husband die."

Neither of us had an answer to that, so we gave none.

The morgue, it turned out, was an adjunct of the Big Pine hospital. Once we were inside, Loretta took a still weeping but somewhat composed Tuyet Le

by the arm, down the hall and to the cold room at the back of the building where her husband waited for her in a refrigerated drawer and where no translations were needed.

Five minutes later when they returned, Tuyet Le's crying had become hysterical, and she'd begun talking wildly. Nothing Dao Thi said had any effect.

But then words seldom do in cases like that.

And then she semicollapsed, so we took her into the hospital and explained the situation to the head nurse, who led Tuyet Le to a room with a bed, where after a while she seemed to calm down.

In the hall outside, while a doctor looked in on her, Dao Thi told us, "She say she get fight with husband. Last time look at him, she mad with him for come to Portland. She tell him get out. She say so sorry now. She say she wanna die, too." The woman sighed and looked at me. Her own eyes were wet. "So sad story, yah?"

I told her it was.

"So sad story," she repeated softly to Loretta.

Who nodded and said, "Sad story."

Things sorted out, after a bit, with Tuyet Le staying where she was for the night and Dao

Thi staying with her, and then Loretta and I were back in her car and on our way back to my cabin.

"Poor woman," she said as we headed out of town. "What will she do?"

I didn't know, and said so.

"Poor woman," Dilly murmured again. "I wonder . . ."

The radio in her dashboard came to life just then, and she answered it.

"Sheriff," the metallic female voice told her, "you'd better get back to the station ASAP."

"What is it, Mavis?" Dilly asked with mild irritation.

"Um . . . you'd just better get back right away."

"Mavis?"

There was a slight hesitation, then Mavis said, "We got trouble, sheriff. Bad trouble."

Loretta looked like she was about to question Mavis further, but she didn't. She looked at me instead.

I gave her a no-problem shrug, and she smiled, turned the car around, and said, "I may have to put you on the payroll."

I shook my head. "No way," I told her. "Too many crises."

Outside the sheriff's station an ambulance and the county coroner's sedan were parked.

There were also the same reporter I'd seen the other day up on the mountain and a small

crowd of people being held back on either side of the door by a brace of stone-faced deputies.

"What the hell is this?" Loretta muttered. She stepped on the gas suddenly and drove past the station, making a couple of squealing turns that took us into a small parking lot at the rear of the building.

As we stepped inside the back entrance, a deputy came up to her, gave me an apologetic look, and asked to speak with Loretta alone. The two of them went into her office.

I strolled down the hall to the large front office, which was oddly quiet given the fact that there were a half-dozen other people there. They were speaking in whispers, as if embarrassed about something, and I sat down to wait.

I could hear other voices coming from the downstairs cellblock, but I couldn't make out what was being said.

I could hear raised voices from outside on the sidewalk, but I couldn't hear them well, either.

After a while the deputy who'd spoken with Loretta came out, looking worried, but he said nothing to me, so I sat and waited some more.

But then, when it seemed like a very long time, I got up and went down the hall to Loretta's office and found her sit-

ting behind the large oak desk, staring at nothing, with a look of blank astonishment on her face.

"Loretta?"

She blinked at me.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

She stared at me for a long moment, then swallowed and looked away again.

I came up close to the desk.

"What is it, Loretta?"

"Charley White Hand," she said in a hoarse whisper.

Oh no, I thought.

She took a few hard breaths, then frowned up at me. "He hanged himself in his cell."

Which was the perfectly depressing end to a perfectly depressing night.

I tried to comfort her, because I could see she was taking it as hard as she should, but she'd crawled into an emotional carapace that I couldn't crack through, and then people started to arrive—the boy's family, looking stunned and solemn, two county council members, looking politically solicitous, and the county coroner finally, looking harried and overworked. For the next couple of hours Loretta was never alone, and I waited, feeling useless, in the outer office again.

After a while, Charley White Hand was taken out in a black

body bag, and after another while Loretta, with the two county councilpersons standing stiffly near her—but noticeably not by her side, gave a brief, matter-of-fact statement to the reporter. Then she disappeared into her office again, and after another long while, one of the deputies told me she'd gone home and had asked them to tell me that she just wanted to be alone.

And partly because I respected her wishes, partly because I didn't know where she lived, but mostly because she was a big girl, I left it.

Which put me on the street at a quarter to twelve without a clue as to how to get home.

But just as I was examining this problem, Mac's cab pulled up and solved it.

"So," Mac said tentatively after I'd gotten in and we were headed up the mountain. "They find out who it was?"

I looked at him looking at me in the rear view. "I beg your pardon?"

He wagged his head toward Mount Fear. "That body you found the other day," he said. "Newspaper this morning said the cops didn't know who it was."

"Oh," I said. "Right. They've I.D.'d him."

He drove in silence for a while, which was fine with me,

but once we were through the switchbacks on the mountain's south face, he said, "Paper said he froze to death."

I nodded. "That's right."

He hmmed, then gave me a look over his shoulder. "You in 'Nam?" he asked.

"I was there," I told him.

He nodded. "Khe Sanh, '68-'69."

"Saigon," I told him, not really wanting to talk about it, "'69-'72."

He sighed. "Long time ago, eh?"

Not long enough, I thought.

The mountain road was slippery with frozen patches of snow, so he had to slow down. He was quiet most of the way, and I really hoped he didn't want to talk about the war, but once we were close to the lodges, he said, "Never got over how hot it was, y'know? Like a steambath, sometimes, you remember?"

"It was hot," I agreed.

He turned onto the road that led up to my cabin and said, "Stupid bugger, probably didn't know what the cold could do."

"I'm sorry?"

He pulled to a stop, then turned in his seat. "You know," he told me. "Walkin' around in the middle of the night, up on this mountain in the dead of winter." He shook his head with surprising sadness.

"Comin' from over there, he probably had no experience of such cold before. He sits down for a rest, and before he knows it, he's asleep—and that's all she wrote."

"Maybe you're right," I said.

I paid him his fare and got out of the cab.

"Stupid bugger," he said again.

I was dead tired by the time my head hit the pillow, but sleep was no easier won that night than the night before.

In fact, that night I had the worst nightmares of my life.

Rippling the fabric of my unconscious, bad little memories, tiny nut-hard guilts that harbor mostly quietly in my mind's dark alleys, careless cruelties half-forgotten that wait like thumbtacks in a pile rug waiting to jab when I didn't expect it, things I'd done and wished I hadn't—I don't know why they picked that night to attack me, but they did and tossed me every which way, and I didn't get the sleep I needed until nearly dawn.

But then, thank goodness, I did sleep, and it was midafternoon before I woke up.

To a brilliantly bright day—and, for some reason, my head was clear, my mind sharp, and as I started out on my run

down the mountain, I felt really good.

Despite some sombre thoughts.

About young Charley White Hand, and his bad, bad choice; and Loretta and the second guessing she was now probably putting herself through; and Tuyet Le and her children and the quietly desperate lives they'd lived so far and had before them; and Long Van Doan.

My snowman.

His own life ended as coldly as it had been lived.

R.I.P.

I jogged past the lookout, feeling strong and good, and around the turn that would take me to the ranger station, a little girl of eight or nine standing in the driveway of a large white house on the mountain side of the highway waved at me as I went by, so I smiled, waved back, and kept moving, thinking I'd better slow down or I'd never have enough for the uphill leg . . .

When a snowball hit me smack in the back of my head.

Surprised, then amused, I skidded to a stop and looked back at the little girl, who'd been joined by a littler boy and who both stood together in the driveway, semihiding behind a mailbox, giggling.

Their eyes looked wide and excited and a little scared.

I wagged a remonstrating finger at them, then grabbed up some snow, made a ball of my own, and threw a perfect strike at the mailbox, which sent both children laughing up the driveway.

I watched them run, casting half-worried, half-happy looks back at me, then I laughed myself and started to run again.

Down to the ranger station, then back the way I'd come, thinking about the steak I was going to reward myself with that night, thinking of the wine I'd have with it, and thinking about my life and how I was living it—and I came to a few decisions, not the least of which had to do with the new me I'd started to create.

I decided to stay off cigarettes, moderate my meat and liquor intake, and keep running.

Not to be young again but to be everything my age can be, and for the first time in a while, my discontent had less of an edge to it, and I was feeling pretty smug . . .

When a squad-sized unit of children, aged five to ten—including the little girl and boy who'd assaulted me earlier—rose up from behind bushes and trees on either side of the highway and let me have it from all sides.

It was a short, noisy, happy snowball fight that ended when I caught one on the side of the head and fell spread-eagled and laughing into a drift on the side of the road. I was too exhausted to defend myself any longer, so after I'd taken a few more hits but didn't return fire, the children got bored with me and ran off, and I stood up, hearing their noise grow fainter, deciding I'd just walk the rest of the way—and feeling, for the first time, glad to be where I was . . .

When the whole thing exploded in my mind like a starburst.

Which is how it happens sometimes.

I took my time walking back up the hill, giving it a good long think—making sure—and when I got back, I nosed around the Fear Mountain Lodge's facilities, talking to people, keeping my questions vague because I wanted reaction less than I wanted answers really—but I got lucky with the restaurant manager, confirmed what he told me with a waitress in the bar, and then I was sure.

Which left me with some decision-making to do. I hiked back up to my cabin, thinking through the options, and was halfway there when Dilly's

Trans Am came up behind me and stopped.

I got in and looked at her. "How're you doing?" I asked.

She looked as though she hadn't slept. Her face was pinched, her eyes red and puffed. She swallowed and said, "I'm . . . not letting myself feel what happened. Not now. Not yet."

I could see that wasn't true, but I nodded.

"I'm going to resign. I wanted you to know."

"Loretta . . ."

"You were right," she said. "That boy didn't belong in jail. I don't know what I was thinking. He was just a kid. Just eighteen . . ."

"Loretta, will you listen to me?"

"I don't know why I came down so hard on him," she went on. "He only took a coat, for God's sake. Just a coat." She banged the steering wheel with a fist.

I grabbed her hand and held it.

"I should have put a close watch on him," she went on. "I should have known."

"Loretta!"

She stared at me.

I stared back at her for a moment, thinking up words to say; then I dropped her hand and nodded toward the road. "Drive me to my cabin," I told her.

Once we were there, I took her inside, put her in a chair in the front room, gave her a long, "I-don't-why-I'm-telling-this-to-you" look, then said:

"About ten years ago, I was stationed at Fort Ord."

She frowned up at me.

I sighed. "I was doing background followups on ROTC grads who'd just gotten their commissions. I turned up some dirt on this kid, a twenty-three-year-old accounting major. He'd had a sexual encounter with another boy about a year before."

Loretta kept her frown in place.

I put a small smile on my face. "So, naturally, I talked to him about it. Told him what I knew—and he was scared. He admitted what I'd found out but told me he was straight. He said he'd gotten drunk on the night in question, and he barely remembered what happened." I laughed shortly and shook my head. "He told me he had a girlfriend, and I could ask her if he was straight or not. He pleaded with me not to jerk his clearance, that he wanted to stay in the ROTC, and get his M.B.A. Said he'd wanted to be an army officer all his life."

Loretta sighed. "I don't see what this has to do with . . ."

"His name was Springer," I told her, in a haunted way. "David Springer."

I walked over to the window and looked out over the sun-bright mountainside, where, not very far away, a man and woman on skis were sidestepping along a gentle slope.

I said, "I not only jerked his clearance, but I recommended a BCD for his failure to disclose his homosexuality."

The woman fell suddenly, and the man laughed, then fell himself.

"A week later, he put a .45 slug into his brain."

Behind me Loretta made a short sympathetic groan.

"A long time ago," I told her. She nodded.

"But, hell, Loretta, that's not even the worst thing I've ever done, but the point is, I didn't quit. I found a way to live with what I'd done and carried on."

She made a face that reflected doubt.

"And that's what you have to do," I told her. "You didn't kill Charley White Hand. He did it—and there was no way for you to know what was in his mind. He made his own choice, and now he's dead." I went over to her and squeezed her shoulder. "But you're alive, and only the living matter, Loretta."

She shook her head.

"And you can feel bad about it," I went on. "You should feel bad about it, but don't let it kill you, and don't take yourself out of a position where you can make a difference the next time."

She laughed without humor. "And what happens the next time?"

"Next time?" I smiled and shrugged. "Next time you'll do better."

She shook her head again, with doubt still on her face, but the look of fatalistic determination was gone.

I changed the subject.

I flopped down on the sofa opposite and said, "Autopsy done on Doan?"

"No marks on the body," she told me. "No trauma. No apparent illness. No toxins in him, either. Nothing wrong with him at all, except being frozen to death."

I nodded. "Suicide, then?"

She heard something in my voice that made her cock her head at me slightly. "Do you think different?" she asked.

"No," I told her truthfully.

She gave me a long thoughtful look. "Well . . ."

"You look beat," I said.

"I haven't slept in I don't know how long."

"You can crash here if you like."

She gave me a tired, what-does-that-mean look, and I gave her a take-it-or-leave-it shrug right back, and after a moment she smiled and sagged back on her chair.

"Tell you what," I said, getting to my feet. "You catch some sleep while I do some shopping, and when you get up, I'll make you a Spanish omelette that will be a poem." I grabbed her hands and pulled her up. "Deal?" I asked, with my face an inch from hers.

She agreed in a manner that suited us both.

Later, with Loretta asleep in my bed, I sat drinking coffee—instant, but real—in front of the fire I'd built in the fireplace, and finished the decision-making process I'd started earlier.

Deciding among other things that although a prudent man indeed takes Nietzsche in small doses, when he was right, he was right.

"Like every good thing on earth," he'd written, "justice ends by suspending itself. The fine name this self-cancelling justice has given itself is mercy. But mercy remains, as goes without saying, the prerogative of the strongest, his province beyond the law."

Which, if knowledge was power, and power characteris-

tic of the strongest, made mercy my prerogative.

At least for the moment.

At dusk, I walked down the highway and found Mac lounging against his cab in his usual place in front of the restaurant. After I'd climbed inside and after he'd gotten in behind the wheel and asked me where to, I said, "Just down the road a ways, Mac. There's something I want to check out."

He took me down the hill, and I directed him to the lookout where I'd first come across the corpse on the bench.

The sun had set by then, and after he stopped the cab, I got out and looked at the lights in the houses, plainly visible through the pines that covered the face of the mountain.

I waved at Mac, who was still sitting in his cab with the motor running, and said, "Could you step out here a minute, Mac?"

He hesitated for a second or two, then killed the engine and got out, coming over to stand where I stood near the railing.

"It's like I figured," I told him.

He frowned at me.

"He might have been lost, but he could have gotten help at one of those cabins. You can see the lights easily enough."

I pointed out the obvious, and Mac looked at the house lights, then back at me.

"The only real danger he was in was the danger he was to himself." I nodded toward the bench. "He killed himself, Mac. He just sat down here and gave life up."

"Oh," he said, as if just getting what I was driving at.

"Vietnamese," I said. "We made life hell for them in their own country, then we made it hell for them here." I took a deep breath and looked out over the railing at the darkening sky. "You married, Mac?"

"No."

"Ever been?"

"No."

"He was," I said.

Mac started to say something but changed his mind.

"The way I see it," I told him, "you got him up here in his own cab, made him get out, and you left him. You drove his cab down the mountain and ditched it."

Mac was quiet.

"I don't think you intended to kill him. I figure you thought you were just teaching him a lesson in turf protection."

I turned back to him and saw him staring at me wide-eyed.

"The thing is, Mac, he'd been taught that lesson before. More than once. Texas. San Diego. San Francisco. Everybody pro-

tected their turf, and there was no place for him." I waved my hand at the world immediately around us. "He'd just run out of places to go."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Mac whispered.

I smiled and said, "I'm not the police, Mac. You don't have to say anything to me. This is just—soldier to soldier."

He snorted, then frowned a brave look of disparaging disbelief.

I smiled again. "But if I did have a talk with the sheriff—who is a close personal friend of mine, by the way—and I told her that you knew that the body I found was of a Vietnamese before that bit of information got in the newspaper, she might want to ask you a few questions."

"And," I went on easily, "if I told her that the manager of Fear Mountain Lodges had seen you threaten Long Van Doan about driving his cab on your mountain, I imagine she'd have a few questions to ask him."

He swallowed and began breathing a little roughly.

"And the sheriff," I continued, "being a good cop and a very smart woman, would probably ask around, fixing your whereabouts Tuesday night, and before too long she'd put two and two together—and

you'd find yourself in kind of a tight spot."

His mouth sagged open.

"Trying to explain to a jury how you only meant to scare the man."

He looked away from me, down at his shoes.

I scooped some snow from the ground and said, "Now, I don't know if they could make a murder case out of this, Mac, but I'm damn sure they'll get you on something."

He said nothing.

"And you'll do some time," I told him.

He heaved a big raggedy sigh but kept his head down.

"And you'll never be the same after that," I added.

He looked up at me with a what-now look on his face.

I worked the snow I held into a tight white ball. "On top of which you will never get a liquor license with a felony conviction in this state, which ends the idea of Mac's Tavern."

His swallowed and looked a little sick.

"You following me, Mac?"

He said nothing, but he was.

I turned and threw the snowball I was holding, watched it strike the top of a tall pine tree down in the valley below, and saw the tree explode with snow. "The thing is, I've got no big desire to see you behind bars, Mac."

He cocked his head slightly.

"I mean, what's the point?"

He frowned, suddenly very interested.

"Doan is dead, Mac, and only the living matter." I shrugged. "Prison seems a waste in this case, don't you think?"

He half nodded, half started to say something, but I stopped him by putting a finger on his chest and telling him, "But you've got to make it right."

He swallowed and stared.

"I mean—justice has to come into this business at some point," I told him reasonably. "You can't get away with this."

"You know that," I said.

He didn't say so, but he knew.

"He left a wife and five kids, Mac. He was their sole support." I waited a moment until his eyes met mine. "Now you're their sole support."

He blinked.

"That's simple enough, isn't it?" I asked. "You just step into his shoes. Assume his responsibilities." I smiled. "Like a blood stripe."

He said nothing, his eyes drifting away from me.

"So?" I said.

He looked back at me.

"Are we connecting here, or what?"

We were.

So, we talked a bit more—negotiated, I suppose—and

came to terms and conditions we could both live with—at least I could, and I hoped he would—and when we were done, I had him drive me into town for groceries, then back up to the lodge.

Back in my cabin an hour later, with Loretta still sound asleep, I started the breakfast I'd promised her. By then it was nearly eight and I decided to make the call then. It was Friday and he might be away for the weekend, and I wanted the ball rolling as soon as possible. After the phone rang twice a boy—eight or nine, using the voice-deepened tones of a boy ten or eleven—answered, saying, "Springer residence."

I asked to speak with his father, who came on the line directly, and I told him who I was, adding, "How're you doing, David?"

"Couldn't be better," he told me. "How about yourself?"

"Same as always," I told him. "Marie and the kids?"

"Fine," he replied in a mildly curious way, and we chatted a bit more about nothing in particular until I got to the point, saying, "Um, David—are you still with First Western?"

"Senior VP," he told me.

"And how's the commercial savings and loan business?" I asked.

"Middling," he replied. "Why?"

"Well," I told him, "the fact is, David, your name came up today in connection with this little money problem I have."

"How much do you need?" he asked in a say-no-more way.

I laughed. "No. I don't need a loan . . ."

"However much it is," he said quickly, "I'll work it out. You know I owe you . . ."

"This isn't about me, David," I told him. "It's about this woman and her children. She's recently widowed, and she'll be coming into some money in a few days. A lump sum payment of seventy-five thousand dollars and a monthly amount as well. The donor wishes to remain anonymous."

"I see," he said, in an I-don't-see-at-all-but-whatever-you-say-is-fine-with-me way.

"The woman will need help," I went on, "managing things. She has some relatives down there in San Diego, but she's Vietnamese and speaks no English. She's expressed interest in opening a restaurant."

He laughed. "Just what San Diego needs—another Vietnamese restaurant."

I laughed back at him, then said, "Can you help?"

He sighed. "No problem," he told me.

"I can have the donor contact you, then?"

"Certainly."

"Great. I really appreciate this, David."

"My pleasure."

"And," I added lightly, "you can call us even."

"No," he told me flatly, after a slight hesitation. "No, I can't."

(continued from page 30)

Dan Sontup, author of "Too Dumb to Steal," a full-time writer and editor, has written about one hundred stories for a variety of magazines. His first sale was to EQMM in 1950; AHMM published one of his stories in 1962. Under the name David Saunders he wrote "*M*" *Squad*, a novelization of the television show, and he also authored a series of true crime articles called "Portrait of a Killer" for *Manhunt*. Mr. Sontup is a native of Stamford, Connecticut, attended NYU, and now lives in East Meadow, New York.

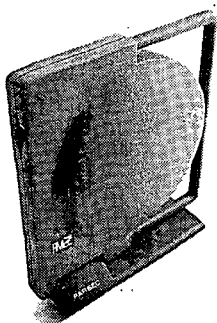
Melissa Milich, author of "Hide and Seek," her first short story for adults, is a newspaper columnist and an intelligence specialist for the U.S. Navy Reserve. Her first children's book, *Can't Scare Me*, was published by Doubleday this past February (the review in *Publisher's Weekly* speaks of "lilting prose" and "wonderful descriptions").

Ms. Milich tells us:

"I grew up and live once again in Santa Cruz County, which Alfred Hitchcock also called home. I can't go so far as to claim we were neighbors; we lived on opposite ends of the Santa Cruz Mountains, about as far away from each other as possible and still remain in the same county. But it was close enough for his presence to be felt (I was a big fan of *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* from an early age), and this colored my perception of an otherwise bucolic little town: all the dizzy rows of apple orchards, the three story Victorians with the dark dormer windows, graveyards with giant angel statues, the stagnant water next to the levee banks which made sharp little points during a sudden wind. Add to this landscape that the night comes on almost too suddenly here, like a curtain being pulled to close slowly and then dropped with a crash. Alfred and I live here."

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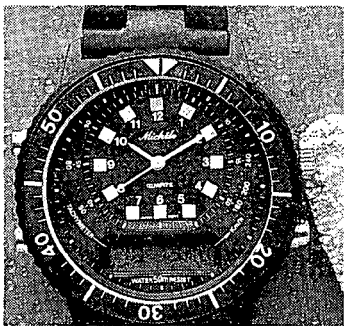
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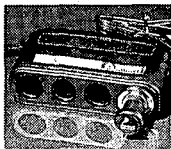
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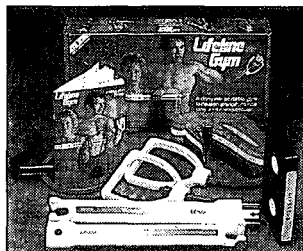
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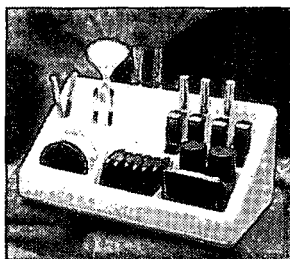


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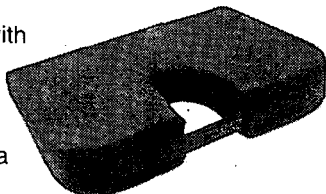


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The Day That Crenshaw Burned

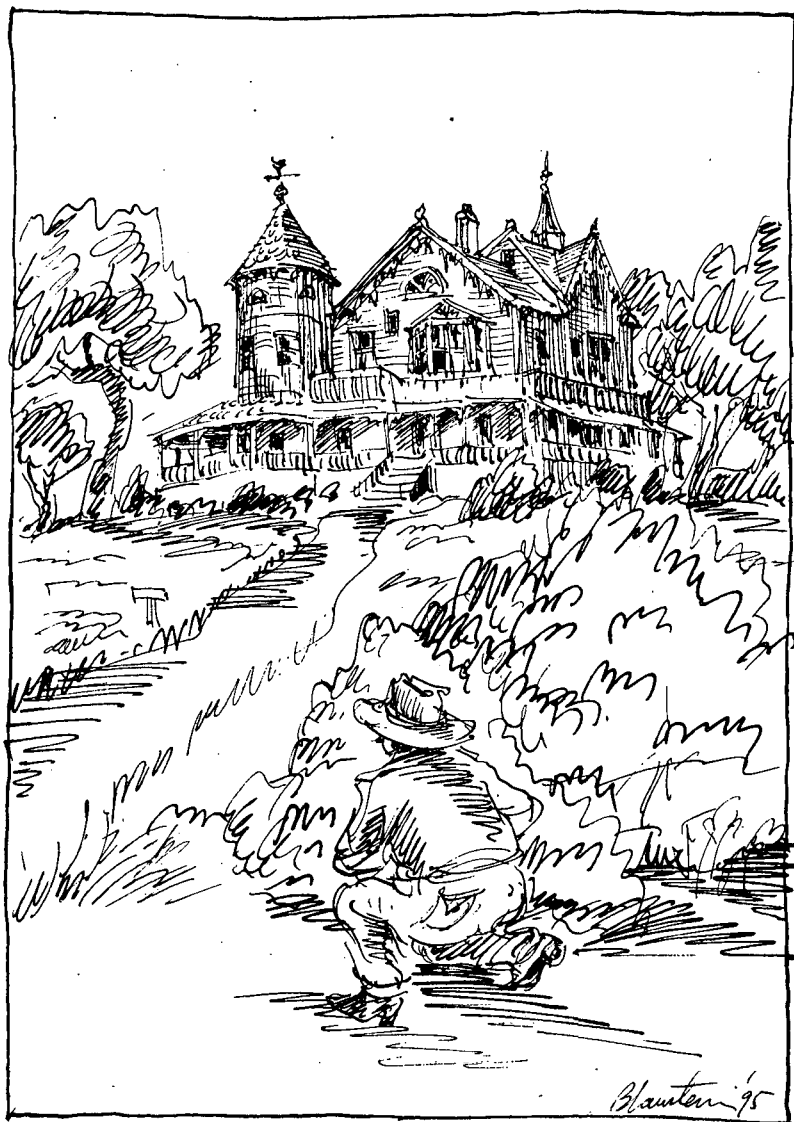
Bobby Lee

Forever after the day he burned the town of Crenshaw to the ground, the sheriff would maintain that what he had done had been motivated solely by the sense of moral outrage he'd felt at the scandalous use he had believed was being made of Miss Petula's vacant house while she was away on her annual summer travels in Europe. But lest you too hastily anoint as a hero the conquering moral crusader, there are perhaps a few things of which you should be made aware.

To begin with, and to give credit where credit is due, it should be acknowledged that the sheriff's initial involvement in this episode was motivated by a legitimate, albeit a totally misdirected, desire to obtain incriminating evidence against a suspect in the wave of counterfeiting activities that at the time was threatening to rock the financial foundation of the entire county. As true as that may be, however, it is equally true that in most circumstances nothing the sheriff says or does can be properly interpreted without giving due consideration to the extremely tempestuous, not to mention extraordinarily longstanding, relationship that for so many years now has existed between the sheriff and Miss Petula.

To put it bluntly, as inglorious and even pedestrian as it may seem, when all the facts and circumstances are considered, it seems far more likely that the sheriff's motivation in this peculiar affair was nothing more than a petty desire to embarrass the love of his life. To uncover within the very home of Miss Petula incontrovertible evidence of some nefarious, maybe even illegal, activity. Evidence he could use against her in their endless struggle for domination of one another.

The plain and simple fact of the matter is that the sheriff and Miss Petula, both of whom have for one reason or another long been sentimental favorites among the general population here, are without doubt two of the orneriest and most cantankerous people you would ever want to meet up with. Over the course of the past six decades they have remained entangled, on an on-again, off-again basis, in what can only be described as a passionate love-



THE SHERIFF OF CRENSHAW FOUND HIMSELF, OF ALL THINGS, CONDUCTING SURVEILLANCE ON THE BEAUTIFUL OLD VICTORIAN MANSION THAT BELONGED TO MISS PETULA CLAIRBORNE.

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hate relationship that almost defies human comprehension. Which is not all that surprising, actually, in view of their remarkably disparate backgrounds.

In the one corner, you see, you have the seventy-four-year-old Miss Petula Clairborne, a blueblooded patrician through and through who has an East Coast pedigree that's about as long as your arm. She also happens to be one of the wealthiest, and one of the most powerful, people in the entire valley. In the whole of Miller County, really. And in the other corner, spoiling for an upset, you have the seventy-three-year-old Sheriff Clyde Duncan, the quintessential blue collar type who hails from proud but long impoverished Puritan stock. Representing the violent clash of blue blood with blue collar as they do, and having little in common other than their advancing years, the sheriff and Miss Petula are, at best, an unlikely pair.

Still, in spite of their loud and often downright nasty differences on almost any issue you care to raise, the two of them have somehow stayed together. The relationship has somehow lasted, weathered the storm. In a manner of speaking, at least. It's just that over the years it's sort of gotten to the point that aggravation has become their strongest and purest expression of the affection that neither one of them will admit to but everybody knows both of them feel for one another. So you see that breaking into Miss Petula's home to get the goods on her, so to speak, would for the sheriff simply be a natural expression of his love for her. Or his hatred of her. With them it's always kind of hard to tell.

Either way, and regardless of his motives, there's little question that the ultimate outcome of the sheriff's seemingly heroic actions, intended or not, resulted in yet another feather in the already crowded cap of Miller County's oldest and certainly most illustrious crimefighter. A truly remarkable outcome, you have to admit, since the entire affair began with nothing more dramatic than a simple misunderstanding over the price of a refill on a cup of coffee.

That pivotal cup of coffee had been poured pretty much without incident by one Donna Sue Walker, the eldest, and in my opinion the prettiest, of the three daughters of old Joe Walker, Sr., Crenshaw's most ardent seller of insurance. The problem didn't arise until several minutes later, when the check was delivered and the recipient of the refill, one Martin John Withers of Kansas City, discovered to his embarrassment that the mention of free refills at the bottom of the faded plastic menu at Vernon's Diner referred

not to the coffee, which as a result of a drought in Brazil was in short supply, but rather to the soda pop, which was always in plentiful supply.

If one were overly charitable, perhaps one might be tempted to attribute the otherwise inexplicable behavior that followed next to the fluster that had resulted from the mistake Withers had made in interpreting the menu. At any rate, after counting out his change on the counter and discovering he had arrived at the diner with only enough coin for a single cup of coffee, in what could only be characterized as a monumental error in judgment Mr. Withers apparently threw caution to the winds and tried to pay his check with a crisp new one hundred dollar bill. It was, you would have to admit, an extraordinarily incautious move for a stranger in town who had just kidnapped a woman and stashed her in someone's basement.

The hundred dollar bill, as it turned out, was one of many that Mr. Withers had recently obtained in a similar, very successful caper in Kansas City. A caper that, after its conclusion, had been so highly publicized in the local newspapers as to persuade him that it would be far wiser to move this new caper, in mid-operation as it were, to a more isolated, less well-informed region of the country. The choice of the town of Crenshaw, other than being strangely appropriate, was as far as anyone can determine purely fortuitous.

Unfortunately for Mr. Withers, the current owner of the historic diner, Donnie Vernon, having been burned on more than one occasion by customers of dubious character's palming off on the diner large denomination bills that turned out to be either counterfeit or stolen, had instructed his employees that without his explicit approval they were never to accept anything larger than a twenty. And being her daddy's daughter, Donna Sue was not the sort to be reticent, or terse, in staking out and defending her position in the ensuing debate.

More important, the increasingly heated, not to mention increasingly loud, disagreement over the payment of the check that followed from Donna Sue's refusal to accept the suspect hundred dollar bill, an argument that was resolved only when the exasperated waitress finally announced that she would pay for the refill out of her own pocket, eventually caught the attention of another of the diner's handful of early morning customers. For sitting at the far end of the counter, quietly eating his breakfast and reading

the morning newspaper, was none other than our own Sheriff Clyde Duncan.

Worse still for Mr. Withers, who ironically had never even considered the possibility of venturing into the counterfeiting business, this was not the first time that his rather distinctive profile, with its beaklike hooked proboscis and offsetting bushy, jaw-length sideburns, had caught the eye of the wily old sheriff. It had, in fact, been only the day before that, off duty and dressed in civilian clothing, the sheriff had stood behind this very unusual looking man, tall and gangly to the point of being spidery, in the checkout line at Schulte's IGA. And on that occasion, as on this one, the sheriff, already on his sharpest lookout as a result of a recent bulletin from the state police detailing the activities of a counterfeiter working the southern reaches of the state, had watched with keen interest as the man had paid his bill with a crisp new one hundred dollar bill.

Now the sheriff, no matter what else he is, or has been called, is at heart a man of action. Having already been put on his guard with respect to the possibly criminal nature of the mysterious stranger's activities, and seeing what looked like the perfect opportunity to strike a preemptive blow against the counterfeiting operation, it seemed only natural that he should surrender to his natural proclivities and attempt to follow the man back to his base of operations. Which, at least to some degree, accounts for why it was that on that fateful afternoon when the town of Crenshaw burned to the ground the sheriff of Crenshaw found himself, of all things, conducting surveillance on the beautiful old Victorian mansion that belonged to none other than the love of his life for these past sixty-some years, Miss Petula Clairborne.

Of course, the real key to understanding the utter chaos that ensued lies in the realization that, in spite of his profound dedication to the enforcement of law and order and his fifty-odd years of loyal service as an officer of the court, the sheriff was not about to let something as insignificant as his inability to secure a search warrant stand in his way. Not of his catching the counterfeiters, of course, though that was how he was later to justify his actions. For them undoubtedly he would have waited. After all, it would only have been a matter of another day or two before the circuit judge finally made his way to Crenshaw and the warrant could have been obtained.

But if it wasn't for fear of losing the opportunity to capture the counterfeiter, you might well ask, what then was the source of this great urgency that drove him? It was, of course, nothing less than the opportunity of obtaining some especially succulent bit of goods on Miss Petula. For such a plum, there can be little question, an illegal search would have seemed trivial to the sheriff. In the past, as is well known among Crenshaw's insiders, bigger obstacles than that have failed to stop the man. As they no doubt will in the future, too.

So it was that, when Martin Withers and his partner, a squirrely little twice-convicted con artist by the name of Donald Jeffries, left the Clairborne mansion shortly after four o'clock that afternoon, the sheriff quickly availed himself of the opportunity. Using the spare key he just happened to know Miss Petula kept hidden under the gorgeous, hydrangea-filled ceramic planter standing next to the front door and totally unconcerned with the finer technicalities regarding the legality of his actions, he entered the mansion for a quick look about.

Now, at this particular point in the story it might be helpful if you knew just a little more about the layout of the town of Crenshaw. Comprising a population that for most of the past century has generally hovered right around the eight hundred mark, the town is laid out pretty much in the shape of a giant egg, with the longer axis running from the northwest to the southeast. For the most part the boundaries fall along Highway 17 on the northern and eastern sides, and along the dry bed of Stimson's Creek on the southern and western sides.

Vernon's Diner, where the saga began, is situated on the west side of Highway 17, at a point just south of where the highway ceases to run northward and executes a sharp bend to the west. Miss Petula's mansion, on the other hand, is on the south side of the highway on the other side of the bend, where the highway has taken on a course pretty much due west. Which means that, though the hilly, heavily forested terrain prevents the one's being seen from the other, the mansion and the diner are actually on the same side of the highway, roughly three-quarters of a mile apart.

The sheriff's office, which adjoins the front of the county jail, is situated in the south end of an old brick building located directly across the highway from Vernon's Diner, which displaces it sufficiently to clear the intervening obstacles and put it on a direct line of sight with the Clairborne mansion. Seeing one from the other

requires only that one look out the window, an interesting feature that in the past, rumor has it, the sheriff and Miss Petula have frequently put to good use.

The good news, therefore, was that the sheriff was able to conduct his stakeout from the privacy and comfort of his own office. Which, for a man of seventy-three years who was suffering from yet another flareup of the gout, was not a trivial consideration. The bad news, however, was that the post office, which was where Withers and his partner were headed when they left the mansion that afternoon, occupies the north half of the same building that houses the jail and the sheriff's office. Withers and Jeffries had set out by car on a round-trip journey that was no more than about a mile and a half long.

As fate would have it, therefore, the sheriff arrived at the mansion roughly the same time Withers and Jeffries entered the post office. Consequently, he had not much more than begun his survey of the dozen or so rooms that composed the ground floor of the mansion when the nefarious duo, having completed their short journey to the post office, unexpectedly returned. And when Withers, becoming suspicious on finding the front door unlocked, dispatched his partner around the house to cover the back door, the sheriff was, for all practical purposes, trapped inside.

Instantly recognizing his predicament, and wisely choosing discretion as the better, really the only, part of valor, the sheriff beat a hasty, and in retrospect perhaps ill-considered, retreat down the stairway to the darker recesses of the basement. From which, of course, the only avenue of escape was the very stair down which he had just so hastily, and now he could see so foolishly, descended. Withers, therefore, on meeting up with his empty-handed partner in the center of the house and reaching the conclusion that the intruder must therefore no longer be on the first floor, had only to set his foot on the uppermost step of the basement stair to effectively cut the sheriff off.

It was, as everyone around these parts already knows, at this fateful moment that, on hearing the men coming down the stairs and realizing that he had no way out, the sheriff made the crucial decision to seek refuge behind the huge and sprawling nineteenth century furnace that covered at least a quarter of the basement. What is less well known, you might be interested to learn, is that in the process of crawling through the narrow passageway between the furnace and the wall, the frightened and by now almost breath-

less, slightly claustrophobic sheriff somehow managed in his haste to lose his grip on his flashlight, allowing it to slip free and fall onto the hard cement floor a short way behind him. Unfortunately, it failed to break when it landed and instead simply lay there shining, like a beacon marking the way into the harbor of his refuge.

Finding he could not retrieve the flashlight from his current position, the sheriff compounded his earlier error by attempting to crawl backward the requisite distance so as to bring it within the reach of his backstretched arm. In the process, however, he caught the pocket of his trousers on the valve set under the rusty old pipe that carried fuel oil to the furnace's reservoir from the tank in the next room. Or would have, had Miss Petula not had the foresight to drain the tank before departing on her vacation.

Having no way of knowing on what it was that he had snagged himself, and with his mental functioning perhaps understandably impaired by his mounting sense of urgency, the sheriff chose to force the issue. That is to say, to barge recklessly ahead, or rather behind, without first disentangling himself from the snag. It was a strategy that had disastrous consequences.

Unfortunately, you see, in its current state of advanced decay the pipe to which the valve was attached was somewhat weaker than was the coarse fabric of the sheriff's trousers. Therefore, the pipe, which had not been drained along with the tank, was the first to give way, and the rather substantial quantity of fuel oil that still remained within it began to pour out.

Feeling the cold, wet fluid rushing onto his flank and identifying the highly combustible fuel from its distinctive odor, the sheriff quite understandably panicked. His pursuers suddenly completely forgotten, the sheriff let loose with a piercing, high-pitched yelp that left little doubt as to his whereabouts. He then began to wriggle his behind frantically while pushing himself with all his might backwards toward the opening through which he had entered, managing somehow to make good progress but scraping the side of his gun against the wall just before he emerged, knocking it from its holster.

Naturally, given the general lines along which the events of the day had been unfolding, when it landed, the gun discharged. And when the gun discharged, the blast ignited a tendril of fuel oil that was slowly trickling its way across the basement floor, flowing roughly along the very same path the sheriff had chosen to follow.

Not certain whether he'd been shot, only certain that if he didn't get out in a hurry it wouldn't matter whether he'd been shot, the sheriff renewed his already violent efforts to free himself from the narrow confines of what he believed was quickly becoming a death-trap. Finally reaching a point at which there was room to rise, he climbed to his feet, wheeled wildly about, and lunged for the relative, albeit short-term, safety of the open territory in the middle of the basement, in the process banging his head against one of the many foot-thick pipes sprouting from the furnace.

With Withers and Jeffries standing by, watching his antics in open-mouthed astonishment, Sheriff Duncan emerged at a dead run from behind the furnace. Blinded as much by the blood that was pouring from a gash he had opened up in his forehead as by the intensely bright light coming from their hurricane lantern, he careened from one obstacle to the next, bouncing his way across the basement. Navigating from memory alone, as it were, yet always traveling in the general direction of the foot of the stairwell. And he almost made it.

In all likelihood would have made it had his mad dash for freedom not been foiled along the way. Tripped up by a misplaced roll of carpet remnant that had been left over from Miss Petula's renovation project last spring, stumbling ahead a few more steps under the momentum he'd built up, traveling on a course tangential to the original, he fell headlong through the open doorway that led into the smaller room in the back of the basement that housed the fuel oil tank.

It was a relatively low-slung open doorway, unfortunately. Striking his head on the top of the doorway frame as he passed through and knocking himself unconscious in the process, he pitched forward into the room beyond. Where he first knocked over, then landed smack on top of, a small folding chair set up in the middle of the floor. A chair that at the time contained the bound and gagged, and rather startled, Miss Virginia Watson, lately of Kansas City.

Miss Watson, having been whisked without benefit of explanation from the sidewalk in front of her college dormitory back in Kansas City late one night of the previous week, had in the intervening days had little opportunity to orient herself to her new circumstances, much less to acquaint herself with the details of the case. Under the circumstances, then, I'm certain she can be forgiven if she quite naturally jumped to the same conclusion any-

one else in her position would. Believing that she was experiencing the preliminary stages of a violent sexual assault, and discovering that her fall had freed her legs from their bonds, she immediately began to rain downward, or rather upward, upon the limp and unconscious body of the sheriff a veritable storm of swift and vicious kicks.

It was at this point that Withers and Jeffries, overcoming their initial shock at the sudden, not to mention bizarre, turn of events, and having a clear view of the rapidly spreading fire around the base of the furnace, decided that it was in their best interests to depart. And in what was probably the most curious part of the whole affair, they rushed headlong up the stairs to the ground floor and across the family room on their way to the back door. Unbeknownst to them, however, said family room happened to be situated directly above the furnace, which had also not been drained by Miss Petula and which chose that very instant to detonate.

Against all odds, neither member of the notorious gang of two was killed, or even seriously injured, by the violent explosion. However, they did wind up unconscious out on the front lawn, buried beneath a rather substantial pile of rubble and debris. When the volunteer fire department, arriving on the premises a short time later, finally succeeded in freeing them, they were both still too stunned and disoriented to provide any kind of coherent explanation for how they had ended up where they were. Shortly thereafter they were transported to a medical facility over in Osage Beach, and after receiving treatment there for a variety of minor cuts and bruises, they were transferred to the county jail.

In the meantime, back within the protected confines of the fuel tank room's foot-thick concrete walls, neither the unconscious sheriff nor the bewildered Miss Watson received as a result of the explosion even the most minor of cuts or scrapes, though the sheriff's uniform was scorched in one or two places by small pieces of burning debris that landed on his backside. And in a curious twist of perspective, in addition to halting the terrible beating she had been inflicting upon him, the explosion and the calm that followed afforded Miss Watson the opportunity to reinterpret the peculiar actions of the sheriff that had precipitated the aforesaid beating.

In perhaps the greatest irony of them all, when members of the volunteer fire department finally extracted them from the basement, which was now nothing more than a giant, gaping hole in

the ground where Miss Petula's house had once stood, the grateful kidnapping victim proceeded to absolve the sheriff of all wrongdoing in the matter. Worse, in a gush of gratitude and adoration that many of us found a bit difficult to stomach, she insisted that the heroic sheriff, with no regard whatsoever for his own welfare, had burst into the room where she was being held, pushed her onto the floor, and thrown himself on top of her in order to shield her with his own body from the imminent explosion.

Well, anyway, that's pretty much the real story of how the sheriff of Crenshaw came to receive the credit for solving the Watson kidnapping case. I'll leave it to you to decide whether the accolades he received, that he continues to receive, were deserved.

As a postscript, I should mention that both the media and the mayor made such a fuss over the sheriff's heroic actions, to the point of having a parade in his honor, that it never even occurred to anyone that he could also be held responsible for the enormous amount of damage that was done by the subsequent conflagration that he had ignited, and that before it was done had consumed the better part of Crenshaw.

Not that it ended up costing the citizens of Crenshaw a single penny to repair, of course. In yet another twist of irony, in a fit of gratitude not unlike that of his daughter, Miss Watson's father, who as it turned out was an enormously successful, not to mention enormously wealthy, Kansas City businessman, contributed more than sufficient funds to completely rebuild the entire town. Better than it was before, most folks would say.

Of course, that was small consolation for Miss Petula, who returned from Europe at the end of the summer to find that her beautiful old mansion, along with a large number of priceless antiques, had been completely destroyed. Needless to say, she was not so inclined as others to overlook the negative aspects of the sheriff's conduct. But then that's another story altogether.

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King José's Hobby, Part II

Linda Paul

Long ago and far away
There lived a king called King José:
A man most looked upon with awe;
A man with just one teensy flaw.

"Twas in the poem "José I"
We told you what José had done.
He'd killed his brother, young Prince Fred.
He'd killed his cousins; all were dead.
He'd caused the royal guests to bite
The dust at every funeral rite.
How were those evil murders done?
Not with a sword. Not with a gun.
Not with a bludgeon or a rope.
Not with a piece of slippery soap.
No, José killed them, every one,
With oyster stew ineptly done.
And when his subjects, struck with fear,
Unto his palace clustered near,
He offered them a barbecue
And started off with oyster stew.

"Oh no!" he cried. "What shall I do?
My subjects have all died of flu."
(For José never ever knew
He'd killed them with his oyster stew.)
"Although I'm king of all I see,
Sans subjects, there's no need for me."

So King José packed up his things,
His fancy hats, his ruby rings,
His medals and his handsome suits,
His underwear, his shiny boots,
And right on top his cooking pot.
He said, "If now a king I'm not,
A chef I'll be from this day hence."
He set him off across the fence,
And down the path, and down the road,
To an inn called Frog and Toad
Where he became the chef du jour,
Attracting folks both rich and poor,
Who came for miles to meet José
And taste his special of the day.

It's sad to say his clientele
Were taken with a deadly spell
Of flu or dropsy, no one knew.
(Of course they'd eaten oyster stew.)

So on and on King José went
From village inn to nomad's tent,
To palaces of dukes and earls,
To harems full of dancing girls.
He traveled all around the world,
His royal ensign hung unfurled,
His cooking pot forever filled
With oyster stew . . . now hot . . . now chilled.
And all around him people died.
Beside their gravesites José cried.
But still he never ever knew
They'd died from eating oyster stew.

Until one day in Timbuktu
A fellow ordered oyster stew.
Instead of noshing it right up,
He stopped a second. Sniffed the cup.
"This stew is smelling slightly off.
The smell's enough to make me cough.
You don't suppose the stew's gone bad?"
(It was the first clue José had.)

He took the cup. He sniffed the stew.
It made one think of witchês' brew.
And all at once King José knew . . .
THERE'D NEVER EVER BEEN A FLU!

He thought of how his brother died.
He'd put it down to suicide.
Remembered royals by the dozens
Dead beside their royal cousins.
Remembered subjects—loving, loyal—
Supping on his "oysters royal."
Remembered townsfolk rich and poor
Who'd flocked to try the "feast du jour."
Remembered nomads, dukes, and earls.
Remembered pretty dancing girls.
Without a doubt (King José knew),
THEY'D ALL BEEN KILLED BY OYSTER STEW!


All day, all night, he sat and worried,
Stirring oysters (slightly curried),
And when at last his wits he found,
He cast the stew out on the ground
And said (his cheeks a crimson hue),
"Thank God *I* don't eat oyster stew!"

But possibly the cops were coming?
Behind him, José heard a humming.
Silhouetted 'gainst the dawn
A horde of sheriffs, pistols drawn,
Approached; they were from every land—
Some well-aged oysters were at hand.
King José quickly filled his pot,
Added water (not too hot),
Spread tables wide across the plain,
Drew up a sign: "José's Mortmain,"
Tossed in peppers, capers, cloves,
And welcomed the judicial droves:
"He's gone," he said. "I'm Carlos. Hi.
You've come so far you must be dry.
I've wine and ale and special beer
To drink, and bread—just sit down here.
José—that villain's flown the coop,
But let me serve you . . . mussel soup!"

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Ivy and the Grass

Jeffry Scott

Much as I value his company and expertise, count yourself fortunate if none of your friends is like McKell.

I'm thinking of outspoken cronies with a taste for puncturing self-esteem and demolishing confidence. It's the paradox of amity: enemies' jibes may be dismissed as sheer malice, but a friend knows what he is talking about. . . .

Tom McKell wrings boundless and tireless pleasure from teasing me about crime fiction. He loves a good whodunit, he assures me. Whether on the TV screen or in print, they raise his spirits—"However blue I'm feeling, never takes long for me to start chuckling."

Crime writers are funnier than sitcom scribes, Inspector McKell maintains, cruelly. Less through getting police procedure wrong (though we do, constantly) than by doing grievous bodily harm to waythings-are likelihood, while recycling and perpetuating stereotypes.

Take informers, grasses. Never mind that few criminals

talk about grasses and grassing unless their hobby happens to be botany or lawn care. Policemen, too, are less than keen on the slang, finding it passé. That is not the point, however: McKell is tickled by the fact that informers are generally presented as male and unprepossessing. Their shifty eyes have a treacherous gleam, they twitch a lot, they are apt to neglect personal hygiene, and the best-scrubbed grass lives in fear.

All of which is a caricature wrapped up in a cliché, according to the expert. Police informers are as unisex-diverse as the rest of society. They are in it for the money more often than not, but then which of us isn't? All but a lucky few, the inspector points out dryly.

"That's all very well," I objected the last time he was mocking me, "but readers just aren't going to believe in a gra—an informer who is respectable, attractive, and wears a dress. It's unexpected and downright unconvincing."

"A pity, then," Inspector McKell observed, dryer yet,

"because Tania Wark convinced *me*. And I've been accused of any amount of stuff in my time, but seldom gullibility."

Having gone that far, he agreed to tell me the rest. In confidence, naturally, so I haven't the slightest hesitation in sharing it, give or take changed names and altered biographies. Since I've dreamed up so many villains, they don't scare me—whereas libel lawyers make my blood run cold.

Tom McKell used to be senior C.I.D. officer at Longdown, effectively the boss, since his supervisor, a detective-superintendent, was based elsewhere.

McKell, no sentimentalist, claims that Longdown had all the shortcomings of a country town (no live theater to speak of, bar Christmas pantomimes; positively no opera or ballet) plus many disadvantages of London. Before the Cold War thawed and peace of a kind broke out, Longdown was awash with money from three different defense factories on its outskirts, and affluence encouraged predators. The place even sheltered a few professional and quite formidable criminals.

"London in microcosm," McKell comments, "without the fun and glamor, such as there is. Oh yes, and the one-way traffic system was a nightmare, parking unspeakable. Made it very difficult to go shopping in Longdown without getting a ticket." (Since McKell tends to have reasons for the smallest of talk, I ought to have tucked parking problems away for reference—it would have saved me getting left behind, later on.)

"I suppose," he muses, "the layout of the place displeased me. There was no *there* to Longdown, if you get my drift. Travelers tell me Los Angeles has the same quality. Everything is mixed up: the nick I worked out of, Central, was on Castle Hill. The main fire station was next door to us, with some posh department stores over the road.

"So you'd think that was the center of town or at least the administrative and snobby quarter. Except that the council offices were a mile the other side of town, alongside the glitziest boutiques. But most of the cinemas were in *another* spot, while clubs and discos were in six other directions.

"So it went, little islands with endless houses and workshops and so forth in between. Pig of a manor to get a handle on. Longdown was prosperous

but only half awake. Yet as soon as you needed to go anywhere in a hurry, a traffic jam developed. Only good thing about it was that, in one respect, Longdown was exactly like the village where I started the Job. Those little islands made it far smaller than its physical size—everybody knew who I was and what I did. And some of them weren't backward in coming forward. . . ."

Inspector McKell had fallen into the habit of letting his wife drive him to work and take their car to her own workplace. He had the use of official vehicles while on duty, but lunch hours left him between the devil of Central's dreary canteen and the deep blue sea of sinfully expensive restaurants where only the bill would be presented in English. Unless he patronized a midget sandwich bar—the premises, not the sandwiches—where no crowd-disliker could bear to linger during nourishment.

Being well organized, Tom McKell picked up a sandwich on the way to work and, weather permitting, lunched in Castle Hill Park. "I'm not anti-social, but you need a minute or two's fresh air and peace and quiet. I do, leastways."

One lunchtime he was absorbed in his paperback *Pickwick Papers* when a shadow fell

across the page. "Fancy bumping into you," Tania Wark trilled. "My, that bench looks inviting, so cosy and secluded." She sat close enough for a shiny nylon knee to graze his thigh. "I hope Mrs. McKell doesn't hear about this and get the wrong idea." He was mildly surprised that his book's pages stayed dormant while her false eyelashes fanned so vigorously.

McKell had been interested in Tania Wark for a month or more. Many men found her eminently fanciable. While bold-eyed blondes with good bodies never lack for admirers, the inspector's interest was professional. He felt that Mrs. Wark had something on her mind, like a deal. Now he was sure of it.

Tania Wark had not happened to encounter him during a lunch-hour stroll. Tall, she chose to look taller, and her backless, needle-heeled shoes were not made for the shaggy turf and gravel paths of Castle Hill Park. Someone had told her that he might well be found there, inspiring Mrs. Wark to drive a mile and a half in order to meet him by accident. Not just a pretty face, she was a qualified pharmacist and ran a chemist shop at Appleyard, one of the town's better suburbs. McKell knew her from Longdown's after-hours drinking

clubs. Mr. Wark—he owned the chemist shop—was a homebody who permitted his wife to behave like a single. Possibly he welcomed her nights on the town as a respite.

Smiling politely, McKell closed his book and studied her. “Penny for your thoughts!” she cried, when silence grew long enough to embarrass her, though not him.

“I never think off duty,” McKell lied, still smiling.

Tania Wark shifted away, jawline firming. But along with that went an aura of new respect. Pretending to sunbathe, she spoke dreamily. “Being a copp—policeman, you must be a good judge of character. Me, people are always surprising me. I’m a t’riffic people-watcher, you see. Well, stuck behind a shop counter, it’s either that or go crazy from boredom.”

He was unmoved by her level gaze, lips slightly parted, eyebrows slightly raised in implicit cue for him to suggest other cures for boredom. He’d dealt with many a Tania Wark in his time, learning that flirtation was their reflex to male company.

Tom McKell made a vaguely impatient noise. Mrs. Wark continued, overtly rambling still, “I usually get them wrong, that’s the funny part. Execu-

tives turn out to be hooligans and vice versa. Angel-faced kids are the worst shoplifters. Even customers I know pretty well, or thought I did, are full of surprises.

“Case in point, Ivy Challis—I only mention her because you know Ivy, too. By sight, anyway, she’s often been in the Rocket Room or Captain Hook’s when you were there. Redhead, terribly attractive, could have been a model. She’s a *great* friend of Ivor Grange . . . rest his soul.”

Inspector McKell’s fisherman’s instinct tingled, but he made no comment on her mixing of tenses in referring to Grange. Two could play at sunbathing. Eyes slitted, he sensed Tania Wark’s stare. “Hope I’m not talking out of turn, saying that. Rest his soul, I mean. Ivor hasn’t been around for days and days, and there are horrible rumors he might . . . have had an accident?”

“I keep hearing that, too. Small world.”

Mrs. Wark laughed angrily, a breathy yelp. “You’d be a dead loss on a talk show, making me do all the work.”

“But,” he countered blandly, “I’m a grand listener.”

She contrived to keep her temper and started over. “Ivy is ever so elegant. I mean, you’d expect her to be into cham-

pagne and caviar, coming on so classy. But would you believe it, I've sold her, oh, pounds' and pounds' worth of baby food recently. The slop in those little jars?" After a longish wait, Tania Wark finished lamely, "It just goes to show, eh?"

"Maybe she's pregnant. Don't women get odd cravings then?"

"Ivy lumber herself with a baby? I don't think so. Apart from anything else, she's a teeny bit mature to get broody." Mrs. Wark hesitated, and he picked up the sharp indrawal of breath before her next, hurried speech. "Actually, I'm a bit worried about Ivy. She seems a bit *stressed*. Wanted me to sell her painkillers, powerful stuff you can't get without a prescription. I was unable to oblige, of course." For an instant Tania sounded schoolgirl-virtuous, in comical contrast to her heavy perfume and strident makeup.

"Of course not," Inspector McKell echoed solemnly.

"Good," she said briskly, as if they had struck a bargain. Her smile was almost natural. "Nice to chat like this. Maybe we can do it again. When I think of anything to interest you. And I'm sure there will be."

"I don't doubt it." He hoped that Tania perceived the silent subtext as, "*There better had be.*" He was sure that she had.

Not an admirable woman; by the same token, not a stupid one. Tom McKell scribbled on a scrap of paper and passed it to her. "Home number, and the other is my direct line. Phones have ears, remember, so just fix up a meet whenever you feel like a nice chat."

At this early stage of the narrative (balder and more factual in McKell's mouth, but my version is accurate) I called time out, on grounds of bafflement. "This is supposed to be about a grass. The way you tell it, the Wark woman told you nothing in particular and no money changed hands."

Tom McKell looked pained. "Then you didn't listen right. She told me ever so much and, having told it, laid herself open to be squeezed for more. As for money, she expected money's worth."

He sighed and shook his head. "Look, for good and sufficient reasons we were very anxious to locate Ivor Grange. He had been involved in a major brawl and taken a first-rate beating some days before La Wark confided in me. Long-down's jungle drums suggested that Grange had crawled away to die—unless he'd been helped. All the usual tales were circulating: his body was part

of a motorway bridge foundation or floating around the English Channel in an oil drum.

"I didn't let on to Tania, but we believed the rumors had substance. Ivor Grange was Ivy Challis's fancy man, lived with her at Longdown inasmuch as he had any fixed abode. Her home was his foregone refuge after a fight. But she denied seeing him again after he went out for a drink on the night he disappeared. She invited me to see for myself that Grange wasn't in her house, and I did. What's more, Ivy was ringing Central every day, asking if we had news of him.

"Then up popped Tania Wark with two nasty bits of news, count 'em—Grange was still alive, and his girlfriend knew where he was. Wake up, chum . . . the baby food! Get your teeth broken, maybe a fractured jaw into the bargain, that's the only slop you can handle. Especially if you dare-n't go to a hospital or even a dentist in case that gets police on your tail."

"And the painkillers," I said, anxious to shine. "They weren't for Ivy Challis, she wanted them for her missing lover."

"Top of the class," the inspector commended, insultingly insincere. "Of course, when Mrs. Wark went out of her way to tell me she hadn't sold tablets

to Ivy, it meant that she *had*. Probably charging well over the odds for the privilege, else why bother. That's what I meant by Tania getting her money's worth. She'd scratched my back, so . . . you know how the saying goes.

"Tania Wark was what you might call a sociable sort. Given the slightest encouragement, she'd have had my trousers off on that park bench, even if it was a business discussion. What a cheated wife would call our Tania is a husband-stealing bitch. Women like her have enemies. She reckoned that sooner or later one or more of them would tip us off about her dodgy dealings at the chemist's. She wasn't wrong, by the way; I'd already had a poison pen letter, and one of my sergeants was sniffing around on the same line. So she was just in time, applying for her insurance policy."

"That's corruption or conspiracy or something," I said.

"No, it's the way things work in the real world," Tom McKell said. "Don't start the po-faced and tut-tut routine. La Wark wasn't operating a crack kitchen in her basement. Run a small retailing business these days, you cut corners or go under. For the price of a bus ticket, her suburban customers could get any item she sold

twenty percent cheaper at the hypermarket outside Longdown or any of the big outlets in town. So why did they keep going to her shop? Partly for convenience, it was just round the corner.

"And because she did little favors, not just hand delivering medicine if a customer was housebound but bending the rules when she thought it was safe. Like selling painkillers, and probably the occasional uppers or downers, without benefit of prescription."

Reading my dubious expression, he shrugged. "If it consoles you, I wasn't giving Mrs. Wark a free license, and she knew it. But she could be fairly sure that if she kept her nose clean in the future and supplied me with tidbits—bear in mind that she mixed with a lot of fellers, was bound to hear things—then my investigation into previous misdeeds might be, let's say, cursory."

Grimacing, he reached for the scotch. "I love telling war stories to civilians. Dotting every *i* and crossing the *t*'s, holding their hand and leading them through the real world. You really are innocents. Look, d'you want to hear what happened, or concentrate on moral indignation, our police aren't so wonderful, and all that good stuff?"

Ivor Grange was a Londoner who happened to spend a great deal of time in Longdown. It wasn't that he'd made the capital too hot to hold him—more to do with being too lazy and arrogant to travel to Streatham in South London, where his main associate lived.

The payroll job wasn't enormous, just under a hundred thousand pounds taken in an armed raid on an aircraft factory outside Longdown. But then it wasn't a very big gang: Grange, an unidentified getaway driver, and a certain Tosh Fisher.

"We knew it was Grange and Fisher. From experience, and I'm only speaking of my county's Force, I would say that in half the professional robberies we know who is responsible—sooner than their wives or girlfriends most often.

"Proving it, though... Grange was a prudent fellow, quite wily. Kept his head, didn't spend like a drunken sailor the moment he scored. Didn't run a flash car, own a big house. Fairly uncommon, for a bandit. Tosh Fisher was nearer your generic London toerag, but until then he'd done what Ivor Grange told him to. Not Fisher's forte, playing second fiddle, but it had paid dividends for years, so he seemed to be solid.

"Grange and Fisher had alibi. Checkmate. Or rather it might have been if Tosh Fisher had been blessed with a grain of patience and self-discipline. Half share of a hundred K—near enough half, their driver would have been on a flat fee—got Fisher's greed glands in an uproar. Easy money and sex, where would us poor coppers be without them? Fisher was courting a beautiful girl, and being homely and sixty years old to her twenty-three, he guessed that loads of money might work better than just changing his aftershave or buying her a bouquet."

Here Inspector McKell made a brief detour to explain that he'd picked this case not to brag—for he rated himself slow and stupid—but to demonstrate how different real grasses are from any I had invented.

"For instance, we knew about Fisher from his ex-wife. She was a Longdown girl who moved back there after the divorce. But she stayed in close touch with Tosh Fisher's dear old mum. Mrs. Fisher—as was lived for the day he would come unstuck and wasn't above urging it along as far as she was able. We never paid her a penny, mark you, but money was the motivation—she

wasn't getting as much as she wanted from him.

"Anyway, his ex-wife whispered to us that Tosh Fisher had promised his mama a nice holiday abroad, soon as his latest ship came home. He'd sussed out a caper involving a pay office—meaning Ivor Grange had set it up, but Tosh liked playing Napoleon of Crime, the ideas man. His mum, poisonous old bat, moaned to her former daughter-in-law that she'd be lucky to get a week in Brighton despite his big talk. Because he was obsessed with this young tart and meant to buy his way between the sheets.

"Now, Grange and Fisher had pulled all their previous jobs in London or Birmingham; it never occurred to me that this forthcoming robbery would be local. We alerted both cities, but Brum and London are full of pay offices so it wasn't much of a warning. Then the Longdown factory was raided, and we felt pretty silly."

Shortly after the robbery, Ivor Grange was invited to assist with Longdown C.I.D.'s inquiries. Grange claimed to have been at a golf driving range ten miles in the other direction at the time of the robbery. The range's manager confirmed that.

Interviewed at Streatham, Benjamin "Tosh" Fisher stated that he had played snooker at a hall there while the robbery was in progress. Again, his presence was confirmed, for what little that was worth.

There matters stood until fingerprint evidence emerged. McKell had watched the scene-of-crime officer laboriously dusting the robbery site, and dismissed it as a ritual as meaningless as tossing a pinch of spilt salt over the left shoulder to avoid bad luck. A dozen people had been in and out of the pay office all day; the masked robbers had worn surgical gloves. But Inspector McKell, not for the first time in the case, was wrong.

"It was a million-to-one chance," he says. "The pay office had a broad counter like a Western saloon. When the robbers burst in, one stayed by the door, and his partner vaulted over the counter. For a moment his weight was poised on his hand, splitting the thin rubber over the ball of his thumb. After he'd tossed the money into a bag and thrown it to the man at the door, he vaulted back over the counter, planting three-quarters of a perfect thumbprint through the gap in the rubber. Ivor Grange's thumb: not just his loops and whorls, but a distinctive scar."

Unfortunately, between incompetence and pressure of work, that finding was not confirmed until forty-eight hours later. By then Tom McKell had the distinct impression that Grange was dead.

The Waterman's Arms was a genteel pub, not one of Longdown's standard boozing booths. Most of the takings were generated by its restaurant, which was featured in several good food guides.

So the owners, a gay retired architect and his personable young chef, were horrified when the fight broke out. It might have passed unseen, a covert imposition of will and settling of scores out in the unlit car park, if Cyril Donahee hadn't stepped outside for a breath of fresh air.

"Oi," he shouted, "pack it in, three onto one's not fair." And by his own account, Donahee, six foot two and overweight for his height, "sort of pushed" one of the brutal attackers.

The man turned on him. Donahee, not too big to move quickly, jumped back just in time before retreating. He did not want to reason with a yard of motorbike drive chain used as a flail. Cyril Donahee, angry over bullying and even angrier at fleeing from it, counterat-

tacked ninety seconds later with five fellow members of Longdown Rugby Football Club's first team, who appreciated gourmet meals but liked mayhem even better.

When the police arrived, the rugger players were in possession of the field and the enemy had dispersed. Tosh Fisher was picked up a quarter-mile along the riverside path, unable to disperse far because his ankle was sprained.

The uniformed sergeant rang Inspector McKell as soon as Fisher was identified. The sergeant proposed to charge Tosh Fisher with making an affray; Cyril Donahee, who'd done his share of making it, was a magistrate's son and a local hero besides, claiming to have intervened in a mugging and then conducted spirited self-defense, so he got off with a warning.

"I ought to get a medal," Donahee asserted when Tom McKell quizzed him later that evening. "The fellow was in a terrible state. Trying to stay on his feet, but they were really laying into him, they'd broken his jaw, you could tell from the way it hung down. More blood than skin showing on his face. They were animals, using chains and I swear one of them had a razor—"

"Very likely, but what interests me is who this chap was."

"Dunno, he was a terrible mess when I saw him. Must have dragged himself away when we started mixing it with the other three. I'm amazed he could move at all."

Pressed for a description, Cyril Donahee scratched his head. "It was dark, just the light from the pub door, and you know how it is in a ruck. . . . He had white hair, well, silvery. Struck me it wasn't natural, maybe a dye job, bit poofy on a feller."

"Ivor Grange," Inspector McKell muttered. "I thought it would be."

Tosh Fisher was in a cell at Central, waiting for his London solicitor to appear. "I think you were provoked," McKell needed, with small hope of its working. "Grange cheated you out of your half of the payroll job, you were in order, taking it out on his hide."

Mr. Fisher, broken, blood-plugged nose rendering him indistinct, retorted, "Dawk to buy 'awyer, leeb be alode."

So Inspector McKell went in search of Ivor Grange, without success, then or on subsequent days. "Grange was cute," he explained to me. "Insisted on holding all the money and paying fellow members of the firm in dribs and drabs afterwards. Enough to keep them going, too little to splash out with.

Wouldn't dole out the remainder until the dust settled.

"Tosh Fisher accepted that until he began thinking below the belt instead of above: needing to dazzle his popsy, he demanded his share right away. It didn't take much working out that Grange had held firm, or that Tosh took a few pals along to beat a change of heart out of his partner.

"It was a damned nuisance, especially when that fingerprint evidence turned up. But for Fisher's greed, Ivor Grange would have been snugged up with Ivy Challis and a false sense of security, and we would have detained him easy as kiss-my-hand. But now he was on the run, not from us but Fisher and company. . . . All very messy and unsatisfactory."

When Grange had been missing for four days, Inspector McKell paid another visit on Ivy Challis. The house had a pretentiously pillared frontage; its interior evoked a furniture store display, expensive without being homelike.

"You don't have to tell me," she replied edgily when McKell said it was bad business and looking worse for her lover with every passing hour. Pampered, groomed, Ivy had a disciplined cloud of auburn hair, green eyes, spectacular legs, all set off by a redhead's pale skin,

creamed, lotioned, and toned to perfection. It was hard to believe that she was pushing forty.

"Search all over again if you like," she offered. "I'd be delighted for Ivor to be here." She twisted the diamond ring on a long finger, as if trying to saw through. "To be honest, if it hadn't been for that fight . . . Usual run of things, you come asking, I would keep my trap shut. But he must be hurt. On my mother's eyes, Mr. McKell, if he comes back or calls me, you'll be the first to know. I don't want him arrested, he'll give me a bad time after—but at least you lot would get Ivor into hospital. He might even finish with me for giving him away. I don't care, as long as he's all right in the end."

McKell had believed her. The clincher coming when, eyes wet, Ivy Challis faltered, "He is just . . . you know, only hurt, isn't he?"

"I hope so, Ivy. From what I hear, he was in a bad way when last seen."

"And that damned pub is by the river . . ."

"We've dragged it, dear. Your feller didn't fall in." He did not share the theory that Tosh Fisher's heavies had taken Grange with them, aiming to dispose of the body. Having gone too far in trying to beat

the stash's location out of him, they might have treated human wreckage with a spark of life as evidence to be destroyed.

Ivy wasn't listening. "He knew Tosh was after him, some row or other, I didn't want to know. Safer for me, right? I begged him to stay home. But no, Ivor goes out on the booze. Reckoned he would be all right at The Waterman's, Tosh wouldn't look for him there." Her face twisted. "All this is down to Fisher! Not just the fight, you're after Ivor for that factory business, but he never had anything to do with it. Tosh gets up to strokes and always drags my Ivor in."

"That's as may be. All Fisher admits is fighting at the pub. Grange wasn't involved, *he* says. Tosh had a drink on his ownsome and was getting into his car when an assailant, whom he'd never seen in his life, set on him. Two passing strangers just happened to join in on Tosh's side, protecting him."

Ivy laughed bitterly. But when McKell urged, "You know more than you're letting on . . . be frank with me, and I can really ruin Fisher's day," she shook her head.

"All I know is you lot keep persecuting Ivor. Just find him and get him to a doctor—*please*."

*

"She played me like an old violin," Inspector McKell admits cheerfully. "I bought the whole act. Until my new friend Tania Wark marked my card about Ivy, that is. Then I caught on to how, um, parochial I had been. Ivor Grange wasn't at his mistress's house; therefore she was not sheltering him. But that was tunnel vision, blinkered to anything outside Longdown."

"Thanks to naughty Mrs. Wark, I cast my mental net a little wider. Ivy lived on my patch, but along with a third or more of the population, she commuted to work in London. Soon as I took that aboard, it was obvious where Grange had to be hiding. It was a pain, since another force was involved: you can't just go barging around the Met' Police's back yard, it bends them out of shape, makes 'em shrill and spiteful. Cap-in-hand, humble pie time, otherwise known as liaison and professional courtesy . . . Our assistant chief constable spoke to his opposite number in The Smoke, and then we were off to the races. . . ."

Ivy Challis's reputation was spotless in Longdown. She explained, but only if asked, that she was housekeeper for a West End hotel group. Good salary,

but it involved shift work, unsocial hours.

In reality, Ivy was a prostitute. She worked out of a ground floor studio apartment in an impersonal, incurious block two or three streets behind Hyde Park. The previous year, a Met' Police colleague had asked Inspector McKell for background on a hooker calling herself Desire, whose car license number turned out to be identical with that of a Mrs. Ivy Challis. If a redheaded Mrs. Challis did live in Longdown and owned a car with that number, she could be eliminated from an investigation. There had been no need for him to question her, so she was unaware of his background knowledge.

In the West End next day, McKell and one of his sergeants met up with Inspector Pete Peters of the Met', flanked by a brace of burly young men in leather jackets. Thin-faced, crewcut, crafty and slangy, Peters looked more of a villain than most villains. He and Tom McKell were by way of being friends after a couple of shared Home Office courses.

Inspector Peters crowed, "Bless my soul, if it isn't the Kevlar Kid!" The day was warm, but wirily angular McKell wore a raincoat buttoned to the collar, turning him

weirdly bulky for the size of his head, rather like a winter robin with its feathers fluffed out. The sergeant being well-fleshed in the first place, his bullet-resistant jacket was less evident under a tweed topcoat.

"The subject's an armed robber, possibly badly hurt and therefore erratic, certainly in fear for his life," Inspector McKell said stiffly. "Better safe than sorry."

"Providing he doesn't pop you between the jolly old horns," Pete Peters retorted, unabashed. "Lady at her place of business, is she? My boys have been keeping obbo since nine this morning, didn't clock her going in. On the other hand, those flats are a right rabbit warren . . . corner site with an alley behind, loads of street doors. Hooker heaven, best part of a hundred apartments, and at least thirty of the tenants are brasses. We couldn't afford a drum there, and don't forget Les Girls pay a whacking great rent for cribs they're using maybe eight hours a day, not every day of the week. Goes to prove what the wages of sin is—money, as if we didn't know."

His minions sniggered dutifully.

Wishing that Pete Peters was less fond of talking, Inspector McKell said, "Ivy Challis

left her house at eight this morning, took the London road. She must be in there by now." They were in a huddle opposite the apartment block; he spoke while staring across the street. He had wanted to raid the flat in the early hours: Ivor Grange would be at his lowest ebb then and, presumably, alone. But arranging a joint operation and getting the search warrant had eaten time.

"You can't see her drum from here," said Peters. "Her window's round the back, looks out on a courtyard, air well with ideas above its station, really. I borrowed the plans from the letting agent."

Inspector Peters spread the sheet on the roof of his low-slung car. "Turn left off the reception area and Ivy Challis's is the third door along this corridor." Reversing the paper, he disclosed another schematic. "Layout of the flat: tiny little lobby, lounge with an alcove off it, just room for cooker and sink. Open stairs at the right of the lounge, seven steps to the bedroom, meaning a bed on a balcony affair, a big ledge. Bathroom and lav en suite, it says in the brochure, which comes out as a tacky concertina door, fabric on steel ribs, over here at the end of the sleeping area, that ledge. Shower stall

and lavatory behind the concertina door."

Folding the blueprint, Peters led Tom McKell clear of the group. "We have a lot more experience, and this is our patch. Let me and my hounds have a bit of fun, you come in straight afterwards." Squinting in concentration, voice lowered, Inspector Peters was wholly serious. "I've drawn" (signifying that he was armed and had sanction for the weapon) "and I'm not married with two kids."

McKell grinned, praying that his churning stomach wouldn't betray him by growling. "Pushy blokes like you need taking down a peg—wait your turn like a little gent."

"Well, I tried." Peters expected nothing else, though the offer had been genuine. He slapped his breast pocket. "Got the search warrant, in case you wondered. Might as well do it . . ."

Returning to the car, he ordered, "Off you go, kids. This guy has been known to carry, he may come steaming out through the window, so heads up. I want a trouble-free shift and us all getting off early, I have this date with Julia Roberts."

"Dream on," floated back as the twosome loped away.

Pete Peters looked down his nose at McKell. "City style, please: forget the bell, 'I am a police officer,' and all that lark. Let's have the door bust sharpish, and get right to it."

"Suits me." Yet McKell hesitated, appalled by his oversight. "I should have tried phoning the flat, see if she's there."

"Been done. She's got cards in phone boxes from here to Piccadilly. No more Desire, she's Fire these days. 'Fire is hot for you . . . ' and the phone number of that flat. I've been calling it since you spoke to me yesterday, tried again just now. Sexy-voiced answering machine every time—I'm not available, but Princess Paprika will give you just as good a time, I'm hot but she's molten,' and punters get another number to try."

McKell cheered up. "Then Grange is there. She's turning trade away, but Ivy's still been coming to London regularly since he vanished. Nursing him, and she can't hide Grange from clients in a one room apartment."

"Seems reasonable." Peters winked at McKell's sergeant, who was carrying a cricket bag. From the strain on its leather handles, something weightier than bat and pads was within. "Brought your key, then. Good lad."

Outside the apartment door, Inspector Peters prostrated himself like an Arab at prayer, sniffing at the crack between the door and carpet. "Somebody's home," he whispered. "Radio going full blast, and I smell cigarettes. Funny ones, unless it's joss sticks. Maybe your guy's using grass for anaesthetics." He straightened lithely. Then, breath warm in Tom McKell's ear: "Two locks, both rubbish. Your guy know his stuff?"

McKell, who'd had just about enough of his colleague, said, "Now's the time to find out." He undid the top buttons of the raincoat, sliding his hand within the belt holster, confirming by touch that the safety catch was on. Pete Peters, nodding, moved to the other side of the door.

"All yours, Tim," McKell mouthed. His sergeant, lips pursed thoughtfully, pressed spread fingers between the two locks. Removing the sledgehammer from the bag, he stepped back and swung expertly, once, twice . . . Changed his grip to drive the hammer's head at waist height, battering ram fashion.

The door flew open.

Revolver out, McKell crossed the minuscule lobby in a long stride. "Armed police! Stay still!"

Broad daylight outdoors, but the apartment's lined curtains were closed and a single baby spot in the array of track lights was the sole illumination. The space, reeking of incense, was shadowy except for that pillar of radiance in the middle of the room, where it was mercilessly bright.

Shock froze him for a heartbeat. Bald, faceless, gleamingly naked, a creature was confronting him: a beast disturbed while savaging fallen prey. Inspector McKell's mind shut down in much the manner of a camera shutter snapping; a refusal to acknowledge the nature of mutilated quarry being guarded by this apparition.

He might, Tom McKell confessed to me years later, have stayed frozen for a second or an hour. But Pete Peters, jammed with the sergeant back in the lobby, had shouted desperately.

McKell understood, in a strangely detached manner, that the creature wasn't an animal after all. Humanoid, it had risen on two legs, it was advancing, and it brandished a kitchen knife, a narrow triangle of honed steel some seven inches long from tip to grip, and the silver was sweeping up, up—

Belatedly the spell broke. His brain snicked back into gear, and he perceived what he was

dealing with. Being right-handed, with no time to switch the revolver to his left, Inspector McKell took his finger off the trigger, ducked under the descending blade, and clubbed his weighted fist against the side of the alien creature's muzzle.

He even had enough presence of mind to catch Ivy Challis as she collapsed. While he was laying her down, a detached observer in his head noted that the floor wasn't glistening from water, it was just that most of the carpet was covered by a sheet of clear plastic.

A cracked voice announced, "Panic over, chaps." Holstering the revolver, he was disturbed to discover that he had been the speaker.

Pete Peters, Adam's apple abruptly prominent, choked out, "Sweet Jesus, what is all this?" Shaken but professional, he bolted back to the corridor before throwing up; crime scenes must not be compromised.

"You had to be there," McKell said, either shrugging or shivering. "Ivy didn't want her clothes stained by the messy task she had taken on, so she stripped, put on a shower cap and a skintight, see-through PVC catsuit, part of her working wardrobe. With just that

one light, and no makeup on, she scared seven kinds of spit out of me. And there were scores of those joss sticks you get at Chinese stores, smoldering away to cover the smell, so the flat was sort of foggy.

"She swore she hadn't been trying to knife me, just making for the door in a panic to escape. Small consolation if she had skewered me, but I didn't press charges. The lady was in enough trouble without my two-pennyworth."

Seeing the question on my face, he said patiently, "Ivy had killed Ivor Grange about an hour before we turned up. She needed to smuggle the body out—dismemberment struck her as the best means. 'I could have carried it a bit at a time,' she told me, might have been talking about handling materials for a garden bonfire, 'and Ivor was too big to get into the boot of my car. I had to make him fit.'"

He mimed another shudder. "Ice for a heart, that one. Then again, having been used and abused by men all her adult life, maybe she saw it as getting her own back. All the same, I'm afraid Ivy was defective when she came off the assembly line. Glamorous but not fully human.

"Try this: I asked how she could have done such a thing,

meaning killing and mutilation—her late boyfriend was minus arms and legs when we broke in, she'd been taking a breather before tackling decapitation. Ivy being such a looker made it even more bizarre, that's what I was driving at.

"But she got the wrong end of the stick, thought I was being sexist, surprised that all women aren't squeamish. The, um, moral dimension was invisible to Ivy. 'Oh,' she said, quite proud of herself, 'Dad was a butcher, I knew how to go about it. And I work out a lot, I'm stronger than I look.'"

"God, how awful."

"I don't believe God was anywhere near Apartment 3A, Rougemont Court, that particular day." But his smile, sardonic, hardly perceptible, soon vanished. "You can drive yourself dotty over maybes and might-have-beens, so I try not to wonder exactly what part I played in Grange's death.

"Until Tania Wark's tipoff, I accepted that Ivy Challis had no idea where Grange might be. After my second visit, she could tell she was in the clear as far as I was concerned. I've a nasty feeling that was the green light. The law was ready to believe that Grange had been knocked off in a dispute with another crook; if his corpse *was* found, Tosh Fisher

had to be the prime suspect. Granted, we picked Fisher up immediately after the fracas at The Waterman's Arms, but he was granted bail the following day. For all we knew, he could have caught up with Grange and finished what had begun outside the pub.

"During the brawl, Ivor Grange escaped. If he'd gone to Ivy's house, Fisher might trace him. Lord knows how, but Grange managed to get himself to her London flat. Likeliest explanation is that anonymous wheelman I mentioned, the getaway driver we never caught up with.

"In hindsight, I believe Grange went to that secluded pub to pay off the driver. No doubt the guy bottled out when Fisher turned up with his lynch mob but hung around at a safe distance, rescued Grange when he had the chance, and drove him to London. Grange had a key to Ivy's crib there—which interested me because he wasn't her pimp and it was a lousy potential hideout, considering Ivy's trade. We'll come back to that in a minute.

"He was in a bad way, front teeth splinters and pulp, broken jaw, but he was a tough nut, confident he'd recover providing he kept away from Tosh Fisher. Grange knew a dodgy doctor who would fix him up on

the quiet, but the quack was out of town for a while. Grange phoned Ivy, told her the score, demanded her help, and settled down to wait for the doc.

"Fair play, Ivy Challis did her best at first. But she wasn't much of a nurse, and he was a rotten patient, half crazy from pain. He whacked her a couple of times for clumsiness, and fairly soon—her version, this—he stopped talking and sulked on the bed, day and night.

"Ivy didn't like being knocked about. After all, she was turning business away to give Grange a safe house, losing a fortune for his sake. Then rumors started about Tosh Fisher's being mixed up in Grange's disappearance, and the poison began working. The idea hit her that there's no risk in murdering a man who is assumed to be dead already. Grange was weak but bound to get stronger as time passed, she'd never have a better chance."

Digesting that, I could deduce no sane motive. "If she wanted revenge," I objected, "she could have had it simply by telling you where to find him."

Tom McKell was pitying. "Ivy wasn't after revenge, no money in that. You haven't listened, old son. Grange was

canny, didn't sling his gelt around. *He stashed it away.*

"We went over that flat—which is to say the Met' did, they're great at searching. Sure enough, a steel box was hidden under the lounge floor. It held most of the hundred thousand from the payroll job, still in the delivery bags, and other cash besides. He had the best part of a quarter-million quid on deposit at his mistress's London address.

"She denied it, but Ivy must have known his stash was there. Whatever pretext Ivor Grange used to get time alone in her flat, keeping a spare key for further access, she'd spotted something, maybe sawdust on a rug or a certain section of floor not quite the same as before. Women in her trade don't need many clues; what blood in the water is to sharks, the smell of money is to them.

"Right up to the trial, Ivy denied all knowledge of the money because it was such a damning motive. She tried to sell us and her QC the tale that Grange was killed in self-defense. He'd lost his temper and tried to throttle her, she grabbed up a knife and stabbed him. Then she panicked, fearing that nobody would believe her version, and started covering up . . .

"Didn't work. The pathologist agreed there was a lot of damage to the body—how could he not? But Grange was smothered, not stabbed. Fibers from a pillowslip were caught on a broken tooth, and it was an exact match with the pillow on the bed. Forget lashing out, she crept up on him and put that pillow over his face and kept pressing.

"As if that wasn't enough, the knives and a cleaver she was using on the corpse had been brought from the kitchen of her house at Longdown, that day, which exploded her spur-of-the-moment story."

I was glad not to be Tom McKell. If he hadn't unknowingly encouraged the woman, if he had been that much more diligent in setting up the raid on the flat . . .

Once more he wrong-footed me, though. "The ironic part is, Ivy didn't need to knock him off. That's another thing the pathologist found out. Grange's scars and bruises were spectacular, but the worst damage was internal; he wasn't sulking, he was dying. Dr. Summerson said that even if we had raided the flat in time to stop Ivy, Grange's chances of recovery were nil by then. When she smothered him, he was already on the way out."

"Bit of a let-off for you," I sniffed. Some of McKell's previous remarks had stung.

"If you choose to regard it in that light." No good at being stuffy, Tom McKell spread his hands. "I got there in the end. With some help from Tania Wark."

And a reflective moment later he muttered, "Idleness was what destroyed her."

"Tania Wark? What had she done?"

Inspector McKell blinked. "Nothing. I was talking about Ivy, she was the lazy one.

"They *are* lazy, more often than not, professional criminals. Unless lazy is the wrong label and it's a matter of having a short attention span, same as those monkeys in *The Jungle Book*, if you're familiar with Kipling. The apes made great plans—and forgot 'em next moment. Crooks are like that: know the need for security, hence all the slang and thieves' argot invented so they can chatter in code. But time and again they spoil themselves. Take a cab right to the front door, too idle to walk a block and leave the cabbie ignorant about their destination. Or rather than destroying all clues at a hideout, they pay somebody to do the donkey work, only it never gets done—that

was the Great Train Robbers. It all comes down to laziness.

"Ivy was just the same. There was reason to try for painkillers at Mrs. Wark's shop, admittedly. But she could have picked up the baby food somewhere else, either in Longdown or, better still, London. Then she might well have got away with it. Instead, painkillers plus baby food made Tania Wark put two and two together, guaranteeing that Ivy was doomed even before she killed the man.

"I asked her why she hadn't done that, bought his special food from a big outlet. Didn't say Tania had split on her, naturally; I led Ivy to believe a customer overheard the order, sneaked to us about it.

"And," McKell challenged, "you'll never guess her reply, not in a hundred years. Ivy looks at me as if I'm a simpleton, and goes, 'Easy for you to say, use a bigger shop. But I was already *in* a chemist's for the pills, so Ivor's bloody baby food was right under my nose. Anyway, have you ever tried finding a parking space in Longdown shopping center on a weekday?'"

"Though I don't believe in gloating over clients," said Inspector McKell, "Ivy tempts me sorely. So clever, discovering where her fancy man kept his

loot, taking advantage of thieves falling out . . . and stupid as they come. She's still in prison, and richly deserves it.

But at least she never walked a step more than she had to, or risked a parking ticket—that must be a great consolation.”

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



M. J. Yancey

Hot or cold? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "June Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the January Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 285.

The Wicked Stepcar

Linda Evans

I read all the current books about blended families before I ever said yes to Donnie. I may have been past thirty, not a beauty, and well aware that single women in my town outnumbered single men by three to one, but I wasn't about to commit to hell on earth just for a gold ring and a new last name. Donnie has two kids, and I mean has them. Lorene, his ex, ran off with a trucker from Wichita. Donnie said the last he saw of Lorene was her hanging out the window of a yellow eighteen-wheeler, yelling, "Bye, Donald. You keep the kids."

The stepfamily books were a help, but I'd have fallen in love with Sherri and Little Donnie anyway. Those kids are sweet as they can be. Besides, I never wanted to actually physically birth kids, so Lorene had saved me the trouble and given me an instant made family. My cat Arthur got along fine with Donnie's bloodhound Frisky, so things should have been perfect. But they weren't.

It was my stepcar that was troubling my marriage. Every

day Donnie drove to his construction job in an old Ford pickup. Pieces could have fallen off onto the road and Donnie wouldn't mind so long as it got him to work and back. It was his car, a red '57 Chevy he kept housed in the garage, that he babied like he'd birthed it himself. But that car rolled over my foot all by itself the first time I went near it. Donnie tried to claim he'd accidentally left it in neutral. That didn't make my foot feel any better. While I was still hopping around and whining, that Chevy squirted oil on my new pastel pants suit.

"You hateful car!" I moaned, slapping the hood. "Oil won't wash out of polyester, I just know it won't."

Donnie leaped across a spare tire and grabbed a clean rag off his workbench. He gently polished the hood where I'd touched it while I tried to wring the oil out of my outfit.

"Shoot, Corrinne. You got to be careful about touching the Princess," Donnie said, concern furrowing his brow.

"Yeah, I know. I might leave fingerprints," I spat out. I



Hawk, Blanton '95

"SHOOT, CORINNE. YOU GOT TO BE CAREFUL ABOUT TOUCHING THE PRINCESS," DONNIE SAID, CONCERN FURROWING HIS BROW.

whirled around and stomped into the house. Donnie took me out later and brought me another pants suit, but I was still not over it. That car, a.k.a. the Princess, had to go.

The first thing I did was to communicate with my spouse the way they tell you to do on all the talk shows. I waited a few days till Donnie was all relaxed and in a good mood. After supper I gave him a few beers and put the kids to bed early. Sherri, who's three, and the baby hadn't had naps, so they were ready. Then I put on my new black nightie, the see-through one I bought with my bonus from my job at the bank. I'd opened the most new accounts.

The nightie billowed around me like a dark cloud as I clumped down the hall and back into the living room. I looked fine. I knew I needed to lose a few pounds, but then so did Donnie.

"Donnie," I said, plopping onto the couch next to him, "we have to talk."

"Now, sugar? The sports is coming on." He put his feet up on the plastic coffee table and just about knocked over the fish-shaped ceramic ashtray I'd made him.

I grabbed the remote off the floor and powered down the set. "Now," I said grimly.

Donnie grinned. He'd just noticed my nightie. "You feeling romantic, sugar britches?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. What I wanted to say, honey, is that you're spending too much time in the garage."

Donnie looked perplexed. But then he usually does. "Hon-eyptot, I got to. That's where I keep the Princess."

"I know. That's what I mean. You spend too much time and money on that car and not enough on me and the kids." My voice got whiny. I didn't add that I was convinced the car was out to get me.

"A man's got to have a hobby." Donnie poked his lower lip out so far it almost reached past his beer gut.

After that he clammed up. Well, it's useless to argue with someone who won't talk. I felt like braining Donnie with the nearest frying pan. I settled for flouncing into the bedroom and locking the door. Donnie had to sleep on the couch.

We argued about the Princess off and on for the next month. Actually, I did all the talking. Donnie continued childishly refusing to argue.

I marched out to the garage one day to have it out with the car. Donnie was still at work, and I hadn't yet picked up the kids from Shirley's World of Fun. I stood in front of that

Chevy with my hands on my hips. I narrowed my eyes down into a mean look and let my cigarette dangle out of my mouth.

"It isn't over yet, sister. You're just an overrated pile of tin. I'll find a way to get you out of my life." My cigarette fell. I grabbed for it automatically and burned my fingers.

The car sat innocently staring at me, unmoving in the half dark of late afternoon. I sucked on my burned fingers and called that Chevy names. Still no reaction. But as I walked past on my way to the door, she bopped me on the knee with her bumper. I swear that car attacked me.

A huge blue bump rose up on my knee. I had to lie to Donnie and tell him that Frisky had jumped on me and knocked me down. Sure. That bloodhound's about as lively as a sloth. All the while I told my story, my heart kept thumping inside my chest like a trapped rabbit. I guess that was when I first decided to kill the Princess.

But I am not stupid. I read, watch TV, go to movies. I know that whenever someone gets murdered, the first suspect is the one with a motive. Since I'd already let Donnie know how much I hated the Princess, he'd know it was me the minute the boys at the body shop gave him the bad news about his car's fa-

tal accident. Then it would be no more marriage, no more stepdog, and no more children.

It seemed clear that the first thing I had to do was to eliminate myself as a suspect. I started by fixing Donnie's favorite dinner. I had my sister-in-law Reva come get the kids for the evening. She owed me one after I'd straightened out her account down at the bank and saved her a lot of financial embarrassment.

"What's that you're cooking?" Reva asked the moment she stepped into the kitchen.

"Donnie's favorite dinner. Blackened roast beef."

Reva bent down to peer nosily into the oven. "Looks burnt to me, Corrinne."

"It's not burnt. It's supposed to look that way," I stared her down.

Actually, I'd invented the recipe by accident one day when I got talking on the phone too long with my sister in New Orleans. Donnie was mad to find supper burned, so I made up the story about it being a real recipe. It turned out he loved it fixed that way.

When Donnie got home, he slid his lunchbox down the countertop, and it splashed into the sink. I smiled and didn't say a thing about him being clumsy.

"Where's the kids?" he asked.

"At Reva's. Honey, this is a special evening just for the two of us." I pointed dramatically toward the dining room end of our kitchen, at the real tablecloth and the table set with glass dishes and metal silverware instead of paper and plastic.

Donnie's eyes, his best feature, seemed to get bluer and even sort of round. Usually they're almost square like his face. "Corrinne, you're a sweet doll."

Donnie went to wash up while I lit the candles. All I'd been able to find were the ones left over from Little Donnie's birthday last month, but I'd arranged them strategically in little groups, so it wasn't too dark. Then I put on Donnie's favorite music, the soundtrack from *Oklahoma*. We could dance after dinner.

"Donnie," I said as he came in and started sawing the roast beef apart. "I've been wrong about the Princess. If you love her, then I . . . I love her, too." Good thing he can't see my eyes, I thought, ducking my head.

Donnie put his knife down and tried to rub the circulation back into his hand. "Gosh, sweet sugar, I don't know what to say. I sure am lucky to have

a woman who knows how to compromise."

Obviously, Donnie's idea of compromise was for me to do what he wanted. But that was okay. I waited a month, making sure to talk nice about the Princess every day, before I started in on the second part of my plan. The actual murder.

The first thing I did was to take the Princess out for a little spin. I had an awful time unlocking her door. It was like she knew what I was up to. She drove fine, though, until I deliberately started her across the Oak Street tracks ten minutes before the freight train was due.

I got out and fluttered all helpless and slow in my red high heels to a gas station. "Help! My car is stalled on the track!" I flapped my hands up and down and made damsel in distress sounds.

The station attendant rushed to a phone and called the police. Unknown to me, they notified the train conductor in time for him to stop the train. Meanwhile, the helpful station attendant roared down the street in a tow truck and yanked the car off the track. I hadn't counted on that. It cost me, too.

Naturally, I didn't tell Donnie. He had no clue I'd actually driven his precious car. After

that, I took the Princess out twice more. Actually chuckling with delight, I left her parked in front of the post office with the keys in the ignition. No one took her. I tried to push her down a hill and off a cliff. She kept stopping, as though someone was mashing the brakes hard. On the way home she bucked and snorted like she wanted to toss me out.

The unaware Donnie, now under the impression that he'd won the argument, spent even more money on that heap. And he practically lived in that garage when he wasn't at work. Spare car parts littered our house like stadium debris after a football game.

Little Donnie said his first sentence—"Where's my daddy?" Sherri said she wished she was a princess. As for me, I spent a lot of time hunched in front of the TV, cramming handfuls of stale popcorn into my mouth when I wasn't sucking on cigarettes. My anger kept building up in me like a tree growing.

One night Donnie kept busy polishing the Princess while I watched a gangster movie. That was how I got the brilliant idea to hire a hit man. How professional of me, I thought, wishing I could reach back far enough to pat myself on the back.

I told Donnie I was working late for the next week and got Reva to come over and mind the kids.

"Working late? Hah!" She put her hands on her ample hips. She looks a lot like Donnie—curly red hair, dimpled chin, square and stocky build—only on him it looks better. "Guess I won't tell my dim-witted brother. Maybe if another wife runs off on him, he'll figure out to leave that car alone."

"You've got it all wrong, Reva," I said primly.

"Hah!"

Lake Boulder's a small town. The gold rush and the lumber rush are long over, and the town fathers are talking about starting a gambling rush. But it was big enough for me to find what I was looking for in just three days.

Bull Don't-ask-my-last-name was a scrawny down and out type. He said he lived in the bad half of a duplex across town, but he didn't tell me exactly where. We settled on a hundred and fifty down and another hundred and fifty when the job was done. I had a secret stash I'd been saving to surprise Donnie next summer at vacation time. This would be a slightly different kind of surprise. I already felt relieved at

the thought of seeing the last of the stepcar.

I wanted Bull to get rid of the car as soon as possible, and he said he would. Two weeks later the Princess still ruled, serene and shiny, in her garage palace behind the house. I resolved to hunt up Bull and prod him a little bit before I went crazy.

I found my hit man at his usual evening location—a bar sporting the Statue of Liberty in green and pink neon on the roof. Bull had deteriorated since our last meeting. He had a fresh black eye and assorted scrapes and bruises, and his left arm was in a cast.

“What happened to you?” I held out a pack of cigarettes and he took six, plus my new lighter.

“Lady, that car hates me. I been by your place three times. You see what happened.” He pointed out his visible wounds. When he started rolling up his pants leg, I figured I’d seen enough. I held up my hand in warning.

“Look,” I said firmly, “I paid you to do a job. I don’t care if you crush it, burn it, or put it down a garbage disposal one piece at a time. Just get rid of the car.”

“Okay, okay. But maybe this is worth a little more than we figured.”

“We’ll talk about it.” I made my voice icy. I stood up. I tapped my watch to let him know the interview was over.

Donnie and I and the kids drove over to his mama’s for her birthday two days later. Donnie’s mama is a confused woman in polka dots who insists on calling me Lorene, so I don’t go there often. But this was an occasion for Bull to make his move. I swallowed my pride.

He made his move, all right. Cop cars and fire engines blocked both ends of our street when we got back. Flames were roaring up from our garage and coming awfully close to the house.

“Oh, honey,” I said, turning tenderly to Donnie. “The garage! Your Princess must be all burned up.”

Donnie clamped his right hand over his heart. He started gasping for breath. “Sugar, tell me it ain’t so,” he whispered, as though he were breathing his last.

Little Donnie and Sherri started crying in stereo from the back seat. I told them to take care of their daddy and patted Donnie’s head.

“Stay here. I’ll run up the street and talk to the cops.”

Run? I practically danced down the block. My troubles

were over, the tormenter melted to scrap. However, my glee turned to gloom when I saw the wicked stepcar squatting untouched at the curb. An interfering neighbor bragged loudly to one and all about how he'd heroically braved the flames to roll the car out of the garage to safety.

Donnie walked up with a kid tucked under each arm, his face a mask of pure joy. I instantly went into my "I love this car" act. I went so far as to lean over and kiss her shiny red roof. I was immediately sorry about this because a hot ember had landed right where I kissed. My lips blistered up.

But that was nothing compared to the condition of the incompetent hit man, as I found out the next day. He was now minus his eyebrows and had a new hairstyle that I'd call blackened stubble.

He pounded the table. "Don't ask me to go after that evil tin monster again. She's too smart.

Besides, I done figured out a better moneymaking plan."

"What's that?" I squeaked, suspicion dawning.

"Well now, you wouldn't want your insurance company finding out how that garage fire started, would you? From now on, lady, you'll give me a regular paycheck to keep quiet." He picked some crud off his cast and flicked it my way.

Bull smirked, ignoring my tears and protests of poverty. He stood up. He tapped my watch to let me know the interview was over. I drove home in a sick daze.

That was before I had time to think. Bull's expecting his first payment next week, and he'll get it all right. Only it figures to be his last payment, too. I have a new hit man. Or should I say, hit car? You see, the Princess and I had a little talk, and we're the best of friends now. Bull will be fatally struck by a red '57 Chevy. After that, I won't go into the Princess's garage and she won't come into my house.

Hot Wire

Steve Corwin

P J. McLean, chuckling at the memory of the flying sofa, crested the top step and paused before an ornate hall mirror. He straightened his tie, flexed his forty-five-year-old biceps, laughed at himself, and turned crimson on discovering he was being watched.

The freckled, heart-shaped face peering over the door chain held mixed amusement and apprehension. "You seem awfully cheerful."

"Sorry. I was just thinking about an old photograph. I'm expected by Mrs. Zoe Zack." The extended business card was examined briefly, then tucked away.

His observer unchained the door and stepped aside. "Come in, we've been waiting for you. I'm Tina, my grandmother's in back. Between the heat, her gout, and the fire she's not doing well." Answering the unspoken question with a fleeting smile, she said a bell was wired to the downstairs street door.

The living room reflected a sparse tidiness sharpened by light flooding in from overhead

dormer windows. McLean followed Tina Zack's athletic figure across the room and down a narrow hall with scrubbed plaster walls desperately needing paint. Along the baseboards, hinting at the building's age, old fashioned gas valves stuck out ready to trip the unwary. The pungent odor of smoke tinged the air. It belonged to a fire barely kept out of the apartment by luck and a deteriorating brick wall. The fire had ravaged City Center Antiques two nights earlier and had killed the store's owner, Clement Firth.

Tina stopped before a closed door, rapped lightly, and went in, beckoning McLean to follow her into a smallish room of faded opulence.

Zoe, swollen feet propped on an ottoman, filled a substantial red leather wingback. An aluminum walker leaned against the wall. An open pack of Kools lay beside a gallon pitcher of iced tea on a card table in front of her. The table, piled high with papers, evidently served double duty as a desk. Even

with every window open and a fan valiantly churning the air, the room was muggy and choked with tobacco smoke.

McLean's hand traveled involuntarily to his tie; he hated the damned things but felt first impressions were vital. His only concession to the heat was a shortsleeved pin-striped Arrow shirt and no jacket. He pulled a notebook and a thin sheet of fax paper from his pocket. The fax, which he'd received in his truck only minutes before, was the floorplan for City Center Antiques.

Tina settled onto a short stool at her grandmother's left, their kinship obvious in their high cheekbones and delicate chins. Zoe settled back. "You started work very early." She motioned toward her apartment's west wall and the fire-ravaged store on the other side.

McLean acknowledged as much as he sat down at the card table, gratefully accepting the offer of tea. The glass, to his surprise, was crystal.

Tina, noting his reaction, flashed him another smile, one tinged with sadness. "My great-grandmother's."

Zoe glanced sideways at her granddaughter, then turned lively but troubled eyes to McLean. "So, you've come to help us."

His gaze was one of kind neutrality. "I've been hired to find out what started the fire."

Anxiety flitted across Zoe's face and a hint of anger creased Tina's. "That doesn't mean I'm not in your corner. After all," he allowed a glimmer of smile, "I've been retained by your lawyer. But my purpose is to discover the truth."

"And then?" Tina asked.

"And then I report to Sarah Shallott. She takes it from there." Sometimes, McLean was known to force conclusions occasionally, not always with felicitous results when his demand for justice overrode good sense.

"I see. So if I did nothing wrong, I have nothing to fear from you."

"Even if you did something wrong by accident, you have nothing to fear."

Tina's look said "yeah, right," but her lips didn't move.

McLean, already familiar with the fire department report listing basic information for everyone involved—names, addresses, Social Security numbers, dates of birth—went over them again quickly. That out of the way, he turned to his own inquiry. "Some of these questions probably repeat what you've already been asked, but..."

"That would be difficult," Tina said shortly. "We filled out a quickie form under the flickering light of a burning building. That Arnold Frye never asked a damned thing. Yesterday morning he told Grandmother the fire started in her pile of rags and he hoped she could live with it. Because of that, that man, my grandmother may lose everything."

Zoe didn't look up from her folded hands. "Don't swear, dear. It's not becoming."

Tina squeezed her grandmother's arm. "You worry about the silliest things."

"No, dear, I worry your anger will cause more trouble. Please continue, Mr. McLean."

He flattened the computer-generated floorplan on the table, then led the two women skillfully from room to room, short questions triggering long answers as he built a pre-fire picture of the building and its contents.

They knew the building from the intimacy of long use, first as owners, then as reluctant renters. Zoe had neared retirement giving public demonstrations on furniture restoration for a marginally likeable man. A long drop from the proud woman who'd inherited an entire city block during Eisenhower's first term.

"I was always careful with those rags, Mr. McLean. Knowledge gained from my grandfather. Hard-learned knowledge. He burned down the first store on this site sometime around 1895."

Tina nodded. "She was careful, believe me."

McLean did, but for other reasons. He sipped his tea, jotted a few notes, and kept going. The stifling room made his neck, confined by the tie, want to explode. Did they know what Firth's plans were for the holes in the second floor? No. Had they ever changed the fuses in the store? Zoe vaguely remembered where the box was but couldn't remember the last time she'd changed one. That had become Firth's problem when he took over.

"Did you always have a packaging operation?"

Zoe shook her head. "Another one of Clement's brainstorms. I don't know if it made money, and I hated having those plastic packing pellets around. Terrible things. They stuck to everything, got into everything. Still I guess it wasn't too bad an idea. He sold collectibles by mail, and the packing was certainly good for that."

When he asked if the packaging room doubled as a dressing room, he drew guffaws. The hair dryers were used to

tighten shrinkwrap around valuable shipments.

From an ingrained sensitivity to lost dreams, McLean hesitated before broaching the last subject. "I believe you worked for Mr. Firth. How did he come to take over the store?"

For the first time anger furrowed Zoe's face. "Yes, I worked for him. I, who'd built the store up from nothing. I, who'd sunk my life's savings into it." She wheezed to a stop, then let out a throaty laugh. "And now, I'm being a silly, stupid old woman."

"I had mortgaged the store, this entire block, trying one business after another. A vain old woman's effort to leave my grandchild something besides a block of decaying, money-swallowing buildings. Finally I used the furnishings from our house to start the antique store. But I was much better at buying than selling. I so hated to part with all that lovely craftsmanship." She waved vaguely around the denuded apartment. "And this is what's left."

Zoe smiled wanly, "Clement offered such a perfect way out. He'd take over the store and my debts. Put everything right, then sell it back to me. Of course nothing ever really works out, does it? Somehow the bills still piled up, although

he kept the big creditors happy."

McLean mentally ticked through his notes from Sarah Shallott. "But he never legally took on your debts."

Zoe's face reddened. "No, he didn't."

"So they remain yours." He nodded to himself. "You were laid you off two weeks ago. Why?"

"It was a kind of combination sick leave," she wiggled a gouty foot, "and layoff. Just for a few days originally. Then he broke his arm . . ." She shrugged.

"So things have been up in the air. Including your finances?"

Zoe looked glum. "I should say so. What happens now? I suppose I get the store back. Along with the banks screaming for their money and Clement's unpaid contractors' bills." She wiped her brow with a handkerchief and said softly, "This is really too much."

"Was he insured?" Tina asked.

"About a half a million on the inventory."

She flushed slightly, but her voice remained flat, "Sounds right. I haven't been in the store for weeks, but say what you will about Clement and Regina Thom, they knew antiques."

"What do you know about the manager, Regina?"

"Not much," Tina answered, "but I was there the day she walked into the store. He looked like someone had dropped a brick on his foot."

"When was that?"

"A year ago. Just as he and Grandmother firmed up their deal. I was supposed to be store manager; Grandmother was to appraise and refinish. Then Regina walked in, they went upstairs for a few minutes, and when they came back down, she had my job."

"An irritating development, surely?"

"At first I wanted to turn the pair of them into sausage. I mean really, the guy broke his word less than an hour after giving it. But it worked out better for me. I start my sophomore year of college next month. Pre-law and accounting."

"So, no hard feelings?" McLean tried not to sound dubious.

Tina snorted. "I suppose. She acted like she owned the place, bossed Grandmother around as if she didn't know country furniture from Sears' best. She knows all right."

"Let's move to Saturday night. The fire report says you and Regina were together during the incident. At midnight.

That you walked out of the Jumping Jack, saw the flames, and called the fire department."

"We belong to the same athletic club. And in fact we were working out together, well, at least we were in the same room. We left at the same time because I wanted to know what was going on with Clement." She almost smiled. "He broke his arm falling down the stairs. I warned him when he remodeled that they were too high and too narrow."

"Who turned in the alarm?"

"I did. Regina was rooted to the spot. Kind of like a snake charmed by the flames."

"You called 911. Then what?"

"I woke Grandmother up and got her out of here." Tina's tone indicated the question was stupid.

McLean swallowed a small grin. "Then?"

"We'd gone down the back stairs and had come out in the alley. Clement was still in the store; he lived there." Her voice cracked, and she looked away. "We saw two firemen and told them. Smoke was pouring out the upstairs windows, and those guys went into it." She sounded awestruck.

McLean rose to leave. "I'm sorry about your loss. I'm certain Sarah will try her best to put you right."

"I don't want to mislead you, Mr. McLean," Zoe said. "Show him the agreement, dear."

Tina shot her grandmother an unreadable look but dug through a pile on the makeshift desk to produce a wrinkled piece of paper. "I got Clement to sign it last month. Pre-law isn't a total waste of time."

It was a will of sorts. A guarantee that if Clement Firth died, his estate would cover all outstanding claims against the business.

"He signed this willingly?"

"Yes, even joked about it. Said he didn't have any family and that we might as well benefit from his death."

Tina escorted McLean out. On the walk down the hall he snagged one of the old gas valves with his foot and nearly fell. Trying to recover his poise he said, "Haven't seen these in years. Do they still work?"

Tina hid a smile. "Lord, no. Grandfather unhooked the pipe in the basement years ago. Grandmother is terrified of gas."

On reaching the street he yanked off the tie and tossed it on the pickup's seat, next to the cellular phone and the fax, his mobile link to Mort Reed, partner and friend. The coveralls he'd worn earlier that morning, jammed under the seat, con-

tributed a faint aroma of their own.

He started the engine and turned the air conditioner on high. As he waited for the cab to cool off, he again studied the aging two story brick buildings with their wooden dormers peeking past the rooflines. Altogether seven stores fronted on Main Street, each business sharing a common wall with the next. Zoe's apartment was above a tobacco and popcorn shop. City Center Antiques was its neighbor to the west. To the east a sandal emporium struggled to survive in southern Oregon's logger country. He pulled into the sparse traffic, his thoughts more on his visit to the fire building earlier that morning than on his driving.

Summit Fire District firefighter Tom Lopez had met him outside the antique store shortly after six A.M. Lopez unlocked the barred front doors. "We had to break them open to get in. Along with the door at the rear, and that was a job."

Pushed through the entrance by a melancholy gust of air and met by the dank odor of water-soaked plaster, they paused over the threshold, giving their eyes time to adjust to the flaccid natural light just bright enough to make their flashlights useless. Power, cut off during the fire, remained off.

McLean motioned to their right. "Zoe's workspace?"

Lopez had looked up from replacing the keys on his belt loop. "Yeah. Actually, it was a clever idea of Firth's—someone adept at refinishing, caning, that kind of stuff, placed right out in front where people could watch her work. As long as she was seated, the gout wasn't a big problem. It was pretty successful. Juanita and I used to stop in just to watch her. And," he smiled ruefully, "buy a thing or three."

McLean nodded. Juanita Lopez was known to have a discerning eye and unerring feel for value.

A hole gaped above Zoe's scorched workspace. With the exception of blackened ceiling tiles every few feet, it was the only flame damage on the first floor.

"Frye thinks the fire started here?" McLean sounded skeptical.

Lopez poked a pile of soggy cloth. "He blamed the fire on Mrs. Zack's leaving oily rags in a bucket, then dropping a cigarette into it. We found the bucket, but its lid was on tight. Besides, she never smoked in the store. Looks to me like these towels were on a table directly overhead. They and the table were ignited by the fire that started on the second floor.

The table collapsed, and the towels fell through a vent hole. They left a false trail, and the chief took it."

McLean studied the ceiling tiles hanging from a frame suspended two feet beneath the original ceiling. A handy means of cutting a room down to eight foot walls instead of ten, saving considerably on heating bills. "Those tiles fire retardant?"

"I doubt it." Lopez's face darkened. "Firth did a rehab in here within weeks of taking over. Lowered the ceiling, painted, generally moved things around. Stupid county doesn't keep track of stuff like that, and he put up those cheap fiberboard tiles. I'm amazed this place didn't light off. As it is . . ." he motioned to the rectangular spots dotting the ceiling.

"What are those?"

"Firth cut holes in the upper floor every twelve feet, the size of vents for an air pump. We're just lucky there weren't more towels to fall through in other spots."

They turned toward the only set of stairs, buried at the rear of the store. Lopez stopped and opened a flimsy door leading into a room beneath the stairs. McLean whistled softly at the flattened cardboard boxes and plastic garbage bags full of Styrofoam packing popcorn.

"The good part." Lopez pointed up, to a hole the size of a large cupboard opening directly into the space above the false ceiling. "The heat pump duct work was to go in here. Makes sense, I suppose, but if this room had caught fire . . ." He shrugged, and McLean nodded. Any fire starting in the storage room would have roared through the space between the real and false ceilings in a feeding frenzy guaranteed to destroy the building. The weekend fire was nothing compared to what it could have been.

Lopez shut the door and circled left, past the buckled steel door guarding the alley entrance, and led the way upstairs. To McLean's experienced eye the smoke pattern looked out of line with where the fire started.

"We found Firth down here." Lopez vanished into a dark, twisting hallway that dead-ended against a brick wall. After two false turns McLean found another narrow hall with Lopez standing over a chalk outline.

"The firefighters who pulled Firth out of here must have been swallowing their hearts."

Lopez glanced at him with a thin smile. "Thought we'd made a good rescue, too. Firth turned out to be heavier than

he looked. Harvey and I busted our humps dragging him out of here."

McLean nodded, remembering the fiftyish antique expert with a porcelain smile, taillight red hair, and iron handshake. He stopped beside Lopez and studied the chalk lines. "What were fire conditions like?"

Lopez made a small deprecating move. "The usual. Easy at first, then when we made that last turn," he nodded at the doorway, "smoke dropped to our ankles, heat barely tolerable. Visibility about this far." He held his thumb and first finger an inch apart. "I found Firth when I hit his head with my knee. I was tracing the wall with my left hand. Had a flashlight in my right, lot of good it was doing. Anyway, my knee hit something and I kinda fell forward and put my left hand right in the center of his chest."

"So he was on his back."

"Yeah."

"What else happened?"

Lopez caught McLean's raised eyebrows and frowned. "Chief Frye ordered a firefighter on a ladder in front of us to open up with a two and a half inch line."

Hitting a fire from the front with a water stream while firefighters were coming up behind the blaze was inexcusably amateurish, but it explained

the odd smoke pattern. It had happened to McLean and the memory never faded. Like being hit with a red-hot hammer. A physical force so immense it left no option but retreat. Chief Arnold Frye was such a bungler it was no surprise he'd missed the cause of the fire.

Lopez shrugged and moved on. His flashlight picked out the blackened remains of a door opening into a square room the size of a large bathroom. Their passage loosened some soot, and McLean let out a wall-rat-tling sneeze.

Lopez laughed. "I don't get it. You're supposed to have enough money to pay off the national debt, but here you are breathing this stuff."

McLean flashed his light around the room. "What would you do if you won the lottery tomorrow?"

Lopez thought for a bit then laughed. "Same-o same-o, I suppose."

McLean grunted. He stuck with fire investigation because he liked it. And from brute curiosity. Fire was a conniving, slippery foe, and he found untangling its trail a fresh puzzle every time.

"It started in here. Where they packed stuff for UPS or mailing or whatever." Lopez let McLean past.

The small room had been loaded on Saturday night with cardboard and shipping popcorn. A fire load of considerable promise. If the blaze hadn't been spotted early, when it broke through the window overlooking the street, the damage would have been worse. Much worse.

"What's in there?" McLean nodded toward a half-hidden door.

"Firth's living quarters. They're actually above the shop next to the antique store. These buildings are so damned old and have had so many occupants." Lopez shrugged. "Small wonder he didn't make it."

McLean wondered why, since Firth had to go through the fire room, he hadn't grabbed the extinguisher by his door and tried to douse the blaze.

They continued touring the maze of short hallways, which eventually took them to the building's other side. There a straight hall ran two-thirds the length of the building, opening onto a series of small rooms, each filled with period furniture.

Lopez turned into a room dominated by a four-poster bed, a chin-high chest of drawers, a secretary, and two chairs. Everything in the room, like everything else on the second floor that wasn't charred, was

heavily sooted. "Thought this would interest you." He ran a finger down the secretary. "I don't think this is the same piece I looked at several weeks ago, but it's supposed to be." He wiped off an engraved card saying the secretary had been built in Pennsylvania about 1804.

Lopez left shortly after seven. Like all volunteer firefighters, he had to work for a living. The fire department provided action, a sense of well-being, and good deeds, but it didn't pay the bills.

McLean photographed and sketched, starting in the street and working back to the packaging room where the fire had started. The floorplan sketches he faxed to Mort Reed, who redid them on his Macintosh and faxed them back. That done, McLean returned to the shipping room and stood in the center of its blackened shell, willing the fire to speak to him. To brag about its direction, its fury and force. About where it started and about its devious ways of spreading. About its deadly intentions.

Finally he knelt before a metal ring, all that remained of a cardboard shipping drum, and scraped gently through the ashes and a tangle of wires. The possibilities were narrowing.

*

The truck slammed into a pothole, bringing up the possibility of a broken spring. McLean concentrated on his driving and steered into a one-hour photo processing shop where he dropped off the morning's work. He then drove the six remaining blocks to a leafy neighborhood and Regina Thom's Victorian, where he parked behind a cobalt blue Miata.

"Who's there, Eric?" The female voice from deep within the house carried a note of exasperation.

Hostile grey eyes sandwiched between slick black hair and a cold-reddened nose flicked sideways, then returned to McLean. "Some guy. Says he's here about the fire."

With ill grace Eric let their visitor in just as the woman belonging to the voice stepped into the front room, vigorously toweling her hair. She wore a tightly cinched robe and rubber thongs.

"Miss Regina Thom?"

"Last time I checked, yes." There was a hint of amusement in her voice. McLean took it, and the boy's snicker, in stride.

"You witnessed the fire Saturday night at City Center Antiques. I'd like to impose for a few minutes to get your impressions of what happened."

Regina Thom, who at twenty-nine still had the wholesome good looks of a Midwestern cheerleader, gripped her robe at the neck. "Let me change first. I've been packing, and it's dirty work. I couldn't take another second of it." Eric's smirk melted beneath her icy glare. "Entertain my guest for a minute, if you're up to it. Get him coffee or something."

Eric shrugged and hung a cigarette from pouty lips.

"Outside with that. I've told you no smoking in the house."

Nervous hurt flicked across his face, like a Doberman kicked by its master.

She ignored him altogether and turned to McLean. "There's coffee in the kitchen." She nodded toward the back of the house.

"I'm fine, thank you."

Regina left accompanied by the slap of rubber on linoleum. McLean admired the room's furniture, wondering about its history, particularly its recent history. He noted with amusement an elaborate electronic weather station and several other expensive catalogue toys. Eric, coughing between drags, followed every move from the verandah.

McLean, a weekend woodworker himself, ran appreciative fingers over a secretary, its open slant lid exposing a series

of small cubbyholes and drawers. He examined the joinery on a small drawer, sighing with envy at the precisely fitted dovetail joints. He replaced it and examined a large color photograph sitting edgewise in a slot. A young Regina sat in the lap of a sharp-featured woman with deeply sad eyes. A teenage girl, sunlight glittering off henna curls, stood behind them, hands gripping the older woman's shoulders.

"My family, Mr. McLean. My brother took it."

"Very handsome. Do they live in the area?"

Regina's face pinched but almost as quickly relaxed, although her voice took on a husky edge. "They're dead."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I. Now, how can I help you?" She settled onto a couch, fixed McLean with a look of calculated neutrality, and ignored the front door as it opened. McLean, standing beside the secretary, tensed slightly at the shadow floating past on thick-soled white shoes in an acrid cloud of residual smoke.

Eric slouched up to the doorway leading to the back of the house. Without taking her eyes off McLean, Regina called to him to continue packing.

"You're leaving town?"

Regina's eyes shifted slightly. "What with my job in ashes and my employer dead, I see no point in staying around."

Surveying the large pile of boxes blocking half the living room he remarked that she was a fast worker.

"I don't have to explain myself. Now what can I do for you?"

"Tell me what you saw Saturday night. Both before and after the fire."

"I saw smoke and flames pouring from the second floor. I knew Clement was up there, at least he was supposed to be. It was late."

"Did the fire seem unusual in any way? Did it move rapidly, for example?"

"I have no idea if it moved rapidly. I've never seen a building burn down, much less watched a kind and generous man die."

"Were you the last to leave the building?"

"I suppose so. Unless Clement let someone in after hours I don't know about. I left about seven. Saturday is always a long day for us."

"What did you do after leaving Mr. Firth?"

"The health club has a small restaurant. I ate a light dinner, then went into the weight room."

"Any idea how the fire started, or where?"

"No. The store's old. I'm no expert. I mean no one looks at a building like it's going to burn, but I'd bet on the wiring. The place was always blowing fuses. Will your insurance company try to blame Mr. Firth for doing some of the wiring repairs himself?"

"Are you a close friend with Miss Zack? I believe the two of you were together the night of the fire. At the Jumping Jack."

"I'd hardly say we're close friends, but her grandmother and Clement, Mr. Firth, were having difficulties and I, well, I commiserated with her."

"Did Mr. Firth own the building?"

Regina worried her lower lip. "That's what so upset Tina. He'd taken over her grandmother's debts along with the business, but he hadn't paid everyone and some of them were getting nasty."

Clement Firth began looking neither kind nor generous.

Perhaps reading McLean's expression, Regina clucked. "I never said he was a good businessman. It seems he was as disorganized as Zoe was. I tried, I tried often, as his store manager, to get him to pay those bills, but he just didn't take owing money seriously, I guess. He is, he was, quite a

salesman. I'm afraid Zoe's no better off now than before." She stopped talking and looked down at her hands, but McLean sensed more than was said. A hint of broken promises. A hint even of anger.

"His will should help her out somewhat."

"Will? Clement had no will." Regina laughed uncomfortably.

McLean rubbed the burn scar barely hidden by his mustache. "Was Firth married? His background seems a bit sketchy."

"No. Never." An oddly positive statement for a relationship less than a year old.

"Were you and Clement close friends?"

Regina's face hardened. "Do you mean were we lovers? Of course not. And you never answered my question. Will the insurance company blame Clement?"

"I work for Zoe's lawyer. The insurance company will send its own person. Did you know Mr. Firth in Florida?"

Regina bristled. "How would I have known him in Florida? I've never been there in my life. We met here, in Summit, last year when he hired me to run the store."

She rose abruptly. "Since you're not from the fire department or the insurance com-

pany, we have nothing further to discuss."

Eric ghosted into the doorway, a crooked grin on his face and a razor knife in his hand. "You need help leaving, pal?" Stuffed up with his cold, he sounded as threatening as Daffy Duck.

"I'll see myself out, thank you." McLean left casually, one eye trained on Eric, reflected in a front window. Eric, watching him watch, took a one-step lunge like a child teasing a chained dog. McLean stiffened but didn't quicken his pace out to the truck.

He ransomed the developed photographs, then headed for the opposite side of town to meet Juanita Lopez, Tom's wife. Her living room, like Regina's, overflowed with a variety of furniture styles. Nothing was less than a century old and McLean's involuntary reaction was always to stand in the center of the room, touching nothing.

She smiled at his discomfort, then sat down at a cherrywood table that had probably cost Tom several weeks' profit from his garage. "Sit down, P. J., and show me the photos."

McLean sat down at the table almost reverently and slit open the pictures' protective envelope. "Are these the same

pieces of furniture you and Tom looked at several weeks ago?"

Juanita studied them carefully. "No." She tapped a photo of the walnut secretary Tom had pointed out. "Have you heard of marriages or monkeys?"

"Never in the same sentence."

She arched an eyebrow. "I was in the shop three weeks ago, hunting. I went back Friday, determined to buy the secretary. It was expensive, but we buy because we like, not for investment. This is the piece that was there Friday. It isn't the piece that was there three weeks ago." Her voice rose in anger. "But Clement insisted it was the same. Acted like I was some taco-brained chica."

McLean swallowed a smile. Anyone who underestimated Juanita Lopez because of her accent was stepping in front of a bus. "Were they similar?"

"Oh sure, if you have absolutely no idea what you're doing." She lifted her shoulders gracefully. "The first one was made of walnut. Beautiful piece. Crafted by someone who loved what he did. This one." She snapped the picture with a short fingernail. "A marriage and a monkey. The top part was grafted on. It didn't fit properly and was made of pine. That's the marriage. The bot-

tom, well that was a little better, a little older, but the hardware on the drawers was wrong and the slant top was made of oak while the main body was walnut. That's the monkey. As in monkeyed with. He wanted the same amount of money, though. Twelve hundred dollars. That man had brass, I'm telling you."

McLean showed her the rough inventory he'd taken that morning. "Is this consistent with what you saw Friday?"

She looked over the list, then sorted through the photographs. "This is what I saw Friday all right. But most of it isn't what we looked at three weeks ago. I can't be positive, but I'd guess that whatever happened to my secretary happened to a lot of other stuff in there, too. Most of this is junk. Some of it's old, okay? But it's still junk."

McLean thanked Juanita, then borrowed her phone and told Mort Reed he was on the way.

Mort rolled into his combination living room and office followed closely by McLean and Caleb, Mort's Rottweiler friend, aide, and guardian. Not that Mort needed guarding. He pivoted to a stop, grabbed an overhead bar, and, with biceps capable of crushing bricks,

hoisted himself into an easy chair. He'd spent hours hunched over his computer digging through databases from Oregon to Florida and looked tired.

"You have everything I've been able to dig up on Zoe and Clement," he motioned to the wad of papers in McLean's fist. "How'd the inventory go with Regina? Any surprises?"

"Just her boyfriend, Eric. A noxious little twerp in white oxfords."

Mort's mouth tightened, "Twenty going on twelve, good build but a little pimply? Eyes like a dead cat?"

"You've met."

"An orderly at Summit Memorial. We've crossed paths. Anything else?"

McLean stretched. "This fire smells like week old carp. Firth was setting up an insurance scam."

"And he got caught in his own bonfire?"

McLean shrugged and thumbed the printouts. "We know Firth had a fire in Orlando. He netted just over thirty thousand dollars. Our contact there thinks the fire was deliberate, but officially it was an overheated extension cord. Firth's name keeps popping up in insurance reports. The adjusters are convinced he was a con artist, but so slippery

he'd never been tagged. Arson may have been his latest hobby."

Mort scratched Caleb's ears. "So Zoe's store was just the latest? He takes over, inflates the building's value through shoddy rebuilding, torches it, and collects?"

"I think it was more devious than that. He knows fire insurance will generally only pay to rebuild. Seldom hard cash to travel on. But inventory is something else. Provided it's destroyed. I think he remodeled the store intending to burn it to the ground. He had some genuine antiques, Zoe's at least, and jacked his inventory insurance way up. Funny thing happened on the way to the fire, however. He slipped the good stuff out the back door, possibly to Regina's. That's why Zoe was forced to take a vacation. He couldn't risk her figuring out what he was up to."

"Only he screwed up and basted himself setting the fire?"

"That's how it looks."

Mort nodded. "I had a chat with the medical examiner this morning while you were clumping around the burn site. They ran a blood gas on him, and Clement's carbon monoxide reading was high enough to kill two men."

"Drugs, anything like that?"

"It seemed pretty straightforward, so they didn't run any tests."

McLean turned the information over. Smoke, specifically carbon monoxide, is the biggest killer in a fire. You don't get fire gases in your blood if you're not breathing, so Clement was alive when it started. So far it fit like a cheap boot. All you had to do was pull hard enough.

Skimming Mort's printouts, he came to a dead stop, picked up Summit Fire's official reports, then compared numbers which he showed to Mort. "Why don't you play dial-a-database again in Florida while I make a call."

McLean punched out Zoe's number, let it ring twenty times, then hung up, puzzlement creasing his face.

He left Mort battling with a Ma Bell clone and on a hunch drove downtown. He circled City Center Antiques twice and was about ready to go home, convinced his imagination was in overdrive. On a whim, he parked, skirted a delivery truck blocking the way, and walked down the alley behind the building. Regina's little blue Miata peeked out from behind a dumpster.

He sidled around to Main Street. The shop was secure, but someone had forced Zoe's

door, then wedged it shut. He slipped into the downstairs foyer and at the sound of shattering glass overhead broke into a canter. He topped the stairs and barrelled toward the open apartment door.

Eric stood in the middle of the living room, a violently struggling Tina Zack clasped around the stomach while he fumbled in a coat pocket. Shards from a shattered vase littered the floor. She planted an ineffectual elbow into Eric's midriff just as he propelled his angry load into McLean's arms.

Scuffling, followed by a sharp slap, came from down the hallway. Tina whirled around but faltered before Eric's soulless gaze above the .45 he'd wrenched from his pocket. Regina appeared a few moments later, gripping the telephone. "Old fool didn't want to part with it."

"What have you done to my grandmother?" Tina would have lunged for Regina had McLean not held her arm. Zoe's voice rolled down the hall assuring them she was fine, although her walker had been moved out of reach.

If McLean's sudden appearance upset Regina's plans, she made no sign. "The pair of you lie on the floor and hold hands. Eric, watch them while I finish

this up. If either one lets go, shoot them both."

For the first time Eric looked genuinely scared. "I never shot anybody before. Why can't I tie them up?"

"Just watch them, dammit. I'll be back in a few minutes." She picked up a small toolbox and a short length of flexible copper pipe and slipped down the front stairs. McLean waited, but the bell didn't sound.

Eric coughed violently, wiped his forehead, and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He plucked one out with his lips. "Stay down, you two." He was so congested he could barely be understood.

A metallic clink from the basement, followed by a faint hissing drew McLean's attention away from Eric and toward a small piece of paper fluttering away from a gas jet. He lifted his head at the sound of the door buzzer, but Eric's shoe caught his ribs a sharp jab. "Stay down, you heard her."

The hissing grew in pitch. "What's Regina doing, Eric?" He already knew the answer as the unmistakable odor of natural gas filled the room.

Eric sneezed, sniffed, muttered, "shut up," and pulled a Bic lighter from his pocket.

Tina's eyes widened, but McLean moved his face into

hers and whispered, "Close your eyes and hold your breath." Tina crossed her eyes mockingly but followed his example.

The flat whump, heard a mile away, lifted the roof six inches and blew out every window on the second floor, raining glass and bricks on startled pedestrians and an irate Regina Thom.

McLean's hearing, already damaged by years of sirens, was slower returning than Tina's. They sat across from each other in Hank's Bistro, two days and two blocks removed from Zoe's former apartment. Mort occupied the end of the table. A jaunty lavender scarf covered Tina's singed curls. McLean had settled for a baseball cap, but the fried ends of his brown hair jutted out in demoniacal tufts. Zoe, sitting beside her granddaughter, had escaped the blast with little more than a powdering of brick dust.

"I still don't understand how we survived. All of us. And how could anyone be so stupid?"

McLean smiled at Tina. "Eric forgot he couldn't smell. He knew what Regina was up to but thought he'd have some warning. Not that it would have mattered. She'd planned on killing him as well. She

hasn't admitted as much, but the look on her face on seeing him walk out of the hospital was not relief."

Tina rubbed her temples. "Explain how we survived."

McLean laid a yellowed picture on the table and nudged it toward the two women, who studied it with mock horror, then genuine perplexity. "That looks like a sofa sticking through the roof."

Both Mort and McLean laughed. "This happened years ago. Two less than experienced handymen decided to fix a gas-fired heater in their basement, only they didn't shut off the gas. The repairs made, they tried to relight the pilot light."

Tina rolled her eyes. "Let me guess. They wound up on Mars."

"Nope, they wound up with minor burns and a wrecked house. The explosion launched the sofa and parted the roof like a clam shell, which snapped shut with the results you see."

"In other words, you were willing to risk our lives using information based on a flying couch."

McLean shot Tina a baleful look. "Well, considering the alternative . . ."

Mort spoke up. "What happened isn't all that unusual. P. J. took a chance, sure, but people have blown the walls off

house trailers and suffered nothing more than minor burns and temporary hearing loss. It's just the nature of gas explosions. Had Eric waited for Regina to trigger the blast, after the gas had run for a while and the mixture was considerably richer, everyone in the building would have died."

McLean scratched his mustache. "It was a close thing, to be sure, but not as carefully planned as Clement's death. How she and Eric managed it may never be known, but they loaded him up with lidocaine, which she'd snagged thanks to Eric's hospital connections, and together they pulled him into the hallway."

Zoe interrupted. "Weren't they afraid of a drug test or something on the corpse?"

McLean looked at Mort, who said, "It was a calculated risk. He had quite a bit in his system anyway from having his arm set. It was a nasty break, and they hoped it'd be overlooked."

"After sending Eric away," McLean said, "Regina took a long extension cord, wadded it up, tied foam rubber around it, then sank it in the middle of a barrel of Styrofoam packing pellets. She plugged in the two hair dryers, turned them on, and went to join you at the health club."

Tina lifted her eyebrows. "So? This started a fire? Is that why you asked about the fuses?"

McLean nodded. "Yes. There were thirty-amp fuses in all the sockets. Should have been fifteens or twenties. That was Clement's doing. I won't get into the math of it, but those two hair dryers were pulling far more electricity than the extension cord could handle, but not nearly enough to blow the fuses. The cord got hot, and wrapped in foam and buried in the barrel it got a lot hotter a lot faster until it burst into flames. After that . . . well, that plastic popcorn burns like gasoline."

"I still don't see why it wasn't just Clement setting up another fraud," Mort said.

"I thought it was at first, but after studying Clement's history and the way he'd rebuilt the store, I wondered. His location of choice was the first floor storage room underneath the stairs. He'd already begun to set his own plan in motion. He shifted the inventory that he'd sell later. Regina just moved first."

Mort studied his fingers. "What made you suspect it wasn't a simple mistake by Clement?"

"Tom Lopez. He found Firth lying on his back, hands across

his chest. Someone fleeing a fire is almost always going to be on their stomach crawling, and their hands are usually up near their mouths."

Tina pressed both palms into her eyes. "But why? Why kill Clement, why kill us?"

"Money and revenge. You and your grandmother were unforeseen nuisances that had to be dealt with." McLean's face clouded over. "Clement, however, was a more personal issue. Regina was his daughter."

There was a stunned silence. Mort continued the story. "P. J. cottoned on to it when he noticed that both their Social Security numbers were issued in Florida. She said she'd never been there. When someone lies, you want to know why. I already had his marriage certificate, and it didn't take long to unearth her birth records."

Zoe shrank. "How awful. How could a child hate so much?"

McLean was enured to life's hard twists, but he had trouble finding his voice. "That's something she's more than willing to talk about. Clement ran off when Regina was two. She had a brother and sister, both older; both doted on her. Both died young in separate car accidents about two years apart. Clement surfaced for both funerals and tried to collect what he could in

insurance settlements. He'd only run out, not divorced his wife, so he figured he had legal rights to their estates."

Tina looked nauseated. "I never liked him, but that's lower than even I thought he'd sink."

"He sank a lot lower. Regina's mother died just over a year ago of ovarian cancer. A long, hard death. A dozen or more operations, terrible bills, no help from anyone, especially her husband. Again Clement showed up, after she'd died, of course, but this time Regina had the last word. Unable to cover her mother's bills, she'd declared personal bankruptcy."

Zoe shuddered. "But why in heaven's name did she come here, and why would he let her in on his scheme?"

"She felt, logically I suppose, that he owed her and was in a position to pay off. He took her on because she threatened to blow the whistle on him. She'd unearthed the truth about the Florida fire, including how it was started. Fortunately for us, she knew nothing about fire behavior. When Regina decided to strike, she mimicked his first fire by setting it in the second floor packing room. Clement had refined his approach. If she'd known, it would have been harder to solve this.

"Of course," McLean smiled

across the table, "you threw a wrench into her plans with that will. Regina's plotting was for nothing if the money went to cleaning up after Clement."

Mort pushed away from the table. "So, no money for Regina now. Insurance companies don't pay people who kill the insured." A hint of admiration crept into his voice. "Clever way she planned on doing the four of you in, though. Sort of a dial-a-bomb."

A shiver coursed through McLean. "She expected the gas to knock everyone out, including Eric. Then she'd skip across town and dial up a remote control appliance switch she'd rigged to short out."

Tina looked out the window, down the street toward the brick shell of her inheritance. "Grandmother and I stand to collect a bundle after all is said and done, but there's no joy in it. What's more, I don't see why he signed the will."

A knowing light glowed in Zoe's eyes. "Petty revenge. To get back at the woman who fought him tooth and nail every step of the way in what he considered legitimate inheritances. Perhaps, too, as life insurance. He knew how much she hated him. But it seems he forgot to tell her. Poor old Clement, he never did get this cashing in on death thing right."

Strangle, Strangle

Jacqueline Freimor

“Tiffany’s beautiful naked body was shining in the firelight. No, change it to: Tiffany’s beautiful naked body was shining in the tub. She sat up and saw the door-knob starting to turn. It was her husband! But he wasn’t supposed to be home until eight. Today she told him . . .” Alicia stops talking and looks at me accusingly. “I hope you’re getting all this down.”

“I’m up to the naked body part,” I say.

“Wil-liam,” Alicia says. Not Will, but William, emphasis on the first syllable. “Now I’ve lost the flow.”

“You could just use your tape recorder,” I point out. “I don’t write fast enough.”

She doesn’t say anything but flops down on the maroon leather sofa and covers her eyes with her hand like she can’t stand looking at me. It’s not so bad. At least it’s not The Look. I can’t stand The Look. Sometimes when Alicia gives me The Look I feel like my head is a balloon just about to bust into a million limp little pieces.

We’re in her father’s study because Alicia is writing a blockbuster bestseller so she can become a millionaire before she gets to college, maybe even before she gets out of ninth grade. She’s not doing it for the money, though, but to get famous. Alicia’s biggest wish in life is to be famous by the time she hits twenty-one. I tell her if anyone can do it she can. As for me, I’m just happy to go along for the ride.

“Okay, I’ve got it,” says Alicia now, sitting bolt upright on the sofa. “Ready?” She closes her eyes and speaks very fast. “*Tiffany didn’t even have time to scream before he was on her like a wild animal. Her naked, glistening body flopped as helplessly as a dying fish as he squeezed her neck harder and harder. He wouldn’t stop no matter what she did. Something terrible was happening to her. She couldn’t breathe. She was passing out. She thought, he’s trying to strangle me, I can’t believe he’s trying to strangle me.*”

I am writing as fast as I can. When I look up, Alicia’s face is a little pink. “Did you get it all?” she says.

“Yeah,” I say, “it’s great.”

Later, in my room at home, I try to read it back and see that I was writing too fast. Most of it is just a squiggle, but two words leap out at me, the only two I can read: strangle, strangle.

Sometimes in school I tune out the teacher and remember things about Alicia. Like:

Alicia spits into her right palm, and I spit into mine. We grind our palms together to mix the spit, then wipe our hands on the grass of her lawn.

"Now we're really married," she says. We run into her house, where the cook gives us lemonade and sugar cookies.

Today, in Mrs. Hennessey's English class, one of the bad ones is starting, but I know by now that I can't do anything to stop it. I just have to let it play out and out until it's done. It's the one where Alicia and me are six years old and playing hide and seek. Alicia's It, and I have a really good hiding place under her parents' bed.

"Shh," I tell Suki, Alicia's new Siamese kitten, who's rubbing against my head and purring so loud I am sure Alicia can hear it. Suki meows loudly, twice, then streaks across the room. I see Alicia's bare ankles and her new red Keds start to walk past the doorway, then stop. I freeze. My heart is pounding hard, and I'm trying not to sneeze as a dust ball tickles my nose.

"I know where you are," Alicia says, almost singing it, her feet coming slowly toward the bed. "I know where you are, and I'm gonna get you." I'm so scared I fling up my head and hit it hard on the wooden frame. Tears spring out of my eyes. All I can think of is to get away. I scuttle over to one side of the bed, but Alicia's hanging over it, her face upside down and red, her pigtails hanging to the floor.

"Boo," she says.

I yell and crawl over to the other side. Her face is there, too. Her eyes are crossed, and she's sticking out her tongue.

Back and forth we go. She doesn't get tired, and I can't fake her out. I can't stand it under the bed. It's hot and itchy, and I feel like I can't breathe. Finally I just give up and start to cry.

"Crybaby," Alicia says, and jumps off the bed. She gets down on the floor and reaches toward my hand. I look at her face, at her hand. "Come on," she says, smiling.

I put out my arm, thinking she's going to pull me out from under the bed.

She laughs a nasty kind of laugh and smacks my wrist with her palm, hard. "You're it," she says. She runs from the room, away from me, fast.

"William," Mrs. Hennessey says, "have you heard a word I've said?" I look up, and my vision starts to clear. I see Mrs. Hennessey's face all splotchy, the fat under her chin wiggling with every word. I start to laugh. And then, right in front of the whole class, she sends me to the guidance counselor because she says I have problems concentrating. As I leave the room, Alicia gives me The Look. I know she won't speak to me for the rest of the day.

Basically, The Look is a mixture of things. Part of it is the face you make when you step in something soft and squishy in the street. And part of it is pity, like when teachers give you the textbook when everyone else in the class has to buy it.

Mostly, though, it's hate.

You don't want someone giving you The Look. Trust me, you don't.

And what did I do that was so bad? I really ask myself that sometimes. That first time I got The Look, it was an accident. I swear.

I mean, it happened so quick. One minute I'm in the playroom with Suki, and the next minute Alicia's crying and the kitten is lying on the carpet all broken and still.

"It was an accident!" I say. "She was scratching me, and I had to pull her off. I guess I squeezed too hard. I couldn't help it. I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry."

I tell this to Alicia over and over again, and finally she believes me. We bury Suki in the lot across from the railroad tracks and tell Alicia's mom that Suki ran away. Alicia swears never to tell anyone, but she gives me The Look for the first time.

I don't know why. It really was an accident, just like I told her. What I never told her is how much I liked it.

Alicia and me are in my room doing our Spanish homework. I have to help her every Tuesday and Thursday after school because for some unknown reason this is the only class where I do better than her. I'm glad she's here, in my room with me. I like it in my room. I've decorated the walls with more than thirty horror-movie posters, like *The Thing* and *Phantom of the Opera* and *Mutant Nuclear Wasteheads from Hell*.

"Tengo, tienes, tiene," I say.

"I have, you have, he-she-you-have," she says.

"Quiero, quieres, quiere," I continue.

"This is boring," she says and flops down on the bed to stare at the ceiling. Freddy from *A Nightmare on Elm Street* leers down at her, five silver knives flashing. "So's this," she says, pointing at Freddy. "Do you think you'll ever outgrow this stuff?"

"Quiero, quieres, quiere," I say again.

"Really, Will. You're kind of obsessed with it. I think it's sick."

"I already have one *madre*," I say. "Do you want to pass this test or not?"

"Fine," she says, and sits up suddenly, rattling off the words.

"Quiero, quieres, quiere, I want, you want, he-she-you wants."

"Right!" I say. "Now: *deseo, deseas, desea*."

"It's . . . wait."

"Okay," I say.

"I'll get it. I . . . no."

"Keep trying," I say.

"Look, I give up. What is it?"

"Never say die!" I say, and pose like I saw once in a picture of George Washington crossing the Delaware.

Alicia rolls her eyes and peeks at the workbook. "Hey," she says, "it's not even in this chapter!" She glares at me. I say nothing. "So what's it mean, already?"

She looks so pretty sitting there that before I know it I push her down on the bed, pinning her shoulders with my hands. I am trying to kiss her, but she's struggling to push me off, twisting her head around on the pillow to avoid my lips.

"Hey!" she says. "Cut it out!" She sounds more surprised than anything else.

I don't let go. She fights harder. She's pretty strong, but I'm stronger.

"Stop it!" she says, sounding scared this time. Then she rakes my cheek with her long, polished nails. My hands go up to my face and come away bloody. Alicia wriggles out from under me and stares at me, breathing hard. "What's the matter with you?" she says. "Are you nuts?"

She grabs her books and runs to the door. Her face is pale, and she's shaking. She looks madder than I've ever seen her.

"You better keep away from me," she says. "If you ever come near me again, I swear I'll call the cops. I swear!"

"*Deseo* is another word for I want" is the only thing I can think of to say. But she's already down the stairs.

After she leaves, I sit in my room and think about doing this thing I do. I've done it so many times now that I don't even have to think too hard about it. The secret is to cut off their air before they know what's happening. A scarf is really good for that, or some string, because you can play with them first. They love to chase stuff like that around the room. They don't even mind when you trail it over their necks, but you have to be able to loop it fast and yank hard. You have to do it fast, before they have a chance to scratch you. That's really important.

Of course, you also have to be really careful to pick only strays. That way no one ever finds out. Especially Alicia.

I go downstairs to get my jacket.

It seems like all I have in my head lately is pictures of me and Alicia: me and Alicia collecting shells at the beach; me and Alicia with milk mustaches, eating chocolate chip cookies; me and Alicia in last year's school play, she as Sleeping Beauty, me as the village shoemaker. I tried out for the prince, but Jason Silver got it. When he woke her with a kiss, she gave him this huge smile. I really admired her then. That's when I first realized that she could be a great actress if she wanted.

Then there are those other pictures that make me feel kind of excited and ashamed at the same time. I try to make them finish fast; sometimes, though, they get stuck and stutter in my brain like those old black and white filmstrips they showed us last year in junior high school: "The Healthy Heart," or "You've Entered Puberty!"

Yeah, right. Like it was some room you could just walk into and be turned into a different person.

I wish I were a different person. Maybe then Alicia would talk to me. She doesn't call me up to help her do her novel. She walks down the hallways at school like I don't exist, laughing with her stupid girlfriends and even talking to some of the guys. I want to tell her not to tell anyone, that I know what I did was wrong, and that I'll never even think about it again, never. But whenever I get near her, she crosses her arms over her chest and narrows her eyes into evil little slits. And she turns away.

*

Jason Silver comes up to me in the locker room after gym, toweling off after his shower. He's about six inches taller than me and has muscles. All the girls think he's a hunk, according to Alicia.

Jason is not at all self-conscious as he flicks me with his towel. "Hey, Billiams," he says, and grins. He thinks it's hilarious that my name is William Williams, so the few times that he speaks to me at all he calls me Billiams. I don't know why everyone thinks he's so cool.

"Hey," I say, "what's up?" I'm suddenly aware of how white and freckled my skin is, and I quickly pull my jeans over my shorts.

He leans against the lockers with his arms crossed over his chest. "Let me ask you something, Billiams," he says. "What's going on between you and Alicia?"

I don't like how he says her name, I don't know why. "What do you mean?"

"Well," he says, "you used to hang around together all the time. Now you don't."

"Yeah, okay," I say. "We had a fight. No big deal. She'll get over it."

"Uh-huh," he says, and looks at the scabs on my cheek. Then he looks away, down the row of lockers. Finally he turns back to me. "Listen, she ever say anything about me?"

I don't know. Maybe it's the way he says it and his grin, like he knows the answer already but he just wants to hear it from someone else, that makes me say it.

"Oh yeah," I say. "She talks about you a lot."

"Yeah?" he says. His face brightens up for a second, and then he fights really hard to look unconcerned. "So what does she say?"

"Well . . ." I say. I act like I don't want to tell him.

"What?" he says, pushing.

"I don't think you wanna know," I say finally.

For a second he looks hurt, but then his eyes get hard and he laughs.

"Oh sure, I get it," he says. "You're such a dork. I don't know why she ever hung around with a loser like you." And he gives me a look of disgust and walks away, his towel trailing over his stupid musclebound shoulder.

"Dork!" I shout after him. "She thinks you're a dork!"

I mean, she's never said anything like that to me about him, but I'm sure she thinks it. I'm positive. How could she ever be inter-

ested in a loser like him? And then, without meaning to, I start remembering another bad one.

Alicia and me are eight, and there is a new girl named Karen in our third grade class. She's skinny and has red hair and freckles. Her eyelashes are the orange color of SpaghettiOs.

"Karen wants to know where your father is," Alicia says to me in the cafeteria. Karen nods.

"You know," I say, "he's dead." I take a gulp of my chocolate milk.

"When did he die?" Karen says. It's the first time she's talked to me directly, even though she's been in our class for two weeks already and follows Alicia around like a puppy.

"When I was a baby."

"What did he die from?" Alicia says.

"Want to see something?" I say. I turn my eyelids inside out and roll my eyes up into my head. I make snarfing noises.

"Big deal," Alicia says. Karen just looks disgusted.

"Let's see you do it," I say.

"So you don't remember what he looks like or anything?" Alicia says.

"I told you this a million times," I say. I take a big mouthful of chicken and rice and peas and chew it. Then I open my mouth so Alicia and Karen can see. "See food," I say. "Seafood. Get it?"

"You're so gross," Karen says, wrinkling her nose.

"And you're a stupid idiot," I say. I am mad. I hate her.

"See, I told you," Karen says to Alicia. "I bet his father's not dead. I bet he never had a father."

"Liar!" I say.

"He's a bastard," Karen says, again to Alicia. She turns to me. "You're a bastard," she says, "and your mother's on welfare." Her mouth is closed in a tight little smile, like she's sucking on a lemon slice.

"Liar liar liar liar liar liar," I yell. Everyone is looking at me, so I sit down.

"Come on," she says to Alicia. They stand up, grab their trays, and start to walk away. I pick up a piece of chicken and put it in my plastic spoon. I aim carefully, and the chicken hits Karen smack on the side of her skinny neck.

"Hey!" she says. Now she's mad. I'm glad to see there's a little red mark where the chicken hit her.

And Alicia turns and gives me The Look.

"Hey, Billiams," Jason shouts from his locker down the row. "You in a coma or something?"

I raise my head from where it's leaning on the locker door. The cold metal is all fogged where I was breathing on it. Jason snickers, and the wetness disappears, leaving no mark.

Of course I believe it when I hear that Jason asked Alicia out, but I still can't believe she said yes. It must be because he's so popular and she wants to be popular, too. She told me that once.

So I'm following them. Who knows what he might try to do? She might need my help.

They go to the movies, some stupid movie. I don't know which one, I barely watch it, but I think it is *Terminator 2*. Alicia is *squealing* at the scary parts and squeezing Jason's arm. I can't believe she's squealing! I want to jump up from behind them, I want to yell, get real, who're you kidding? Alicia is definitely not the squealing type.

After the movie, they go to Baskin-Robbins for ice cream. I can't go in because they'll see me, but I can watch them through the big glass window from across the street. Alicia is walking up and down the store, staring at all the different flavors like she can't make up her mind what to get. More lies. Whenever we go to Baskin-Robbins, Alicia gets Rocky Road. She *always* gets Rocky Road.

When they finally come out of the store, I see which flavor she picked. Strawberry.

They cross the street and sit on a bench right in front of the tree I'm hiding behind. They're so close I can almost touch them.

"So," Jason says, like he couldn't care less, "you're not going out with anyone, are you?"

"No," Alicia says. "Why?" Her voice is breathy and high. I've never heard her sound like this before.

"I don't know," Jason says. "I sort of thought, like, maybe you and Billiams . . ."

"Oh no," Alicia says, very fast. "He's just a friend."

Jason snorts. "How could you even be friends with him? He's such a dweeb!"

I wait to hear what Alicia says. My heart feels like it's being squeezed by a giant fist.

She laughs her nasty laugh. "I don't know. I've known him forever—his mother used to come in to clean for us sometimes, and she always brought him with her. I mean, I'd never go out with

him. I guess I feel sorry for him, you know? At least I used to." She lowers her voice. "You know what he did to me a couple of weeks ago?" And she tells him about what happened in my room and how disgusting it was. They both laugh about it like it's the funniest joke they've ever heard.

I stop listening. My heart is exploding, and I can't breathe. All I can think is I can't believe it. This is the worst thing that's ever happened to me.

Until he kisses her.

He. Kisses. Her.

Right out on Northern Boulevard! I almost run to her then, no matter what she said about me. To help. To pull him off her, that pervert, that sex maniac.

And then.

She's kissing him back.

All I can do is stand there. The kiss goes on and on. It will never end. People are looking at them, old people are looking at Alicia and Jason and then at each other, smiling. They are happy for them. One old lady points to Alicia's ice cream cone, which she still holds in her hand. It drips slowly onto the ground.

And then I know what to do. What I have to do.

Even though it's almost eight thirty and the sun went down half an hour ago, it's still really warm out, and I'm sweating. I don't mind admitting that I'm nervous, I'm really nervous, which just makes me sweat even more.

The thing is, I called Alicia yesterday and apologized to her. I begged her, really begged her, to forgive me for what I did that day in my bedroom. She finally gave in. I didn't think she would at first, but she finally did. She even agreed to meet me at our special place down by the bay.

I bought her a present. Alicia loves presents.

God, it's hot. My hands are all slippery. I wipe them on the sides of my pants, and suddenly Alicia's here, walking toward me. She's so pretty that I smile at her and for a second I almost forget. I almost forget, and then I remember.

What I remember is this:

She doesn't love me. She'll never marry me. She loves Jason.

Alicia opens the box with the scarf in it and smiles at me.

I almost forget, then remember.

The secret is to cut off their air before they know what's happening, before they have a chance to scratch you.

Once I remember that, the rest is easy.

Strangle, strangle.

Crazy Carlos Picks a Winner

Susan J. Pethick

The last strains of "Paperback Writer" were fading out as I waited for "Crazy" Carlos Rubio to announce the afternoon's thousand dollar winner on KRZY. I felt like a thirteen-year-old, staring at the cheap speakers like they held the secrets of the universe, but hey, a thousand bucks is a thousand bucks. Besides, I needed the money.

To say it had been a slow couple of months was to say the Hundred Years' War had been a bit long. It was the fifteenth already, and I hadn't paid anything but the mortgage; Rose City Electric was threatening to cut off my power, and my relationship with the local 7-Eleven was now on a cash-only basis. That's the problem with self-employment. It can quickly turn into self-unemployment. I tweaked the receiver and homed in on 98.7 FM.

"This is Carlos-the-rube Rubio, your crazy DJ on KRZY. How crazy am I?"

I cringed as Carlos let loose with one of his patented laughs: a hyena with hiccups.

"Crazy enough to give away one *thousand* dollars every single day. And all you have to do to win is send a postcard with your name and phone number on it to—"

I thought back to the hundreds of postcards I'd sent this guy, trying to skew the odds in my favor—so far without luck—and sighed impatiently.

"Cut the crap, Carlos, and pull my card out of the hopper."

"All right, folks. I'm reaching into my bag . . ."

"Come on, come on . . ."

"I'm pulling out today's card . . ."

"Hurry up!"

"I'm looking at the name . . ."

"Just read the damned thing, will you?"

"And today's winner is . . ."

I leaned forward.

"William Ackerman of St. Mary's!"

"Damn!" I pounded my fist on the carpet hard enough to raise a cloud of dust.

Crazy Carlos was still blathering. "Now, Bill, you know the rules . . ."

Yeah, yeah, I knew the rules, too. The winner had to drive



THE STYLIST SHOOK HER HEAD AND GLANCED IN LUCILLE'S DIRECTION. THE WOMAN WAS BLABBING A MILE A MINUTE, OBVIOUS TO ANYTHING THE TWO OF US HAD TO SAY.

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down to KRZY's studio by five o'clock to pick up the money. If he didn't, there'd be another drawing, this one at five fifteen. I switched off the radio and checked my watch: three oh-six. Maybe I'd get lucky and Bill Ackerman would have a flat on his way downtown.

I walked into the kitchen and made myself a consolation snack—buttered saltines and a Diet Coke—while I considered my options. Mal Benderson might have some extra work he could throw my way. Surveillance, maybe, or even a few hours of research on a missing person. Not much, but it might keep me from pulling my hair out waiting for the phone to ring. Or I could call my mom and see if she'd lend me enough to get through the month. But then I'd have to listen to her lecture me about how private investigation is no job for a woman, even though we both knew she was thrilled as hell the day I got accepted at the police academy. Which is pretty much the same thing, riskwise.

Of course, it's not the danger that bothers her; it's the fact that I work alone. As in, without any eligible men around. I sighed and crammed another cracker into my mouth. The only other option was to ask Dennis for an advance on my

alimony check, and I'd sooner starve than do that.

Fortunately, I was spared all of the above when the phone rang.

"Cartwright Investigations."

The voice on the other end made me think of cappuccino. Dark and rich.

"Miss Cartwright?"

"Cath. What can I do for you?"

"My name is Gordon Lively. Malcolm Benderson gave me your name."

Good old Mal. I owed him one for this.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Lively?"

"I'd like to hire you to investigate someone for me." He chuckled nervously. "It's a long story, really. One that doesn't translate well over the phone, I'm afraid."

"I see. Well, I work out of my home, Mr. Lively, so I usually meet my clients at their place of work. If that isn't good for you, we could meet at a restaurant, or the library . . ."

"Oh no. My office is fine. I think everybody around here knows the score by now anyway."

"Sounds good." I yanked a flyer for free carpet cleaning out of the trash. "When's a good time for you?"

"Can you make it tonight? I should be free by five thirty. I'm afraid I'm in a bit of a hurry."

I tested my pen out on a corner of the flyer. "Five thirty it is."

He gave me the address and a cryptic set of directions that I more or less ignored. I never venture downtown without a map anyway. I told him I'd see him in a couple of hours and hung up, smiling. This was even better than Crazy Carlos's thousand bucks. This was a case!

Five o'clock rolled around faster than I'd anticipated, and I found myself flying down the freeway to get to Mr. Lively's office on time. I parked in a lot that advertised a three fifty maximum for parking after five and ran the three blocks to Lively Enterprises, located at the top of the U.S. Bank Building. I stepped into the elevator and pushed the button for the thirty-second floor.

Mr. Lively was still busy when I walked in. The receptionist offered me my choice of herbal tea, Evian, or espresso, all of which I declined in favor of five minutes in the bathroom to fix my hair and tuck in my blouse.

There were cloth hand towels in the ladies' room and bowls of potpourri that smelled like spiced peaches in the lounge. The fixtures were gold-plated, and the floors were marble. From the look of things, Gordon

Lively was a man who put his money where his mouth was. I finished drying my hands and headed back out to the reception area.

There didn't seem to be anyone else around. I took a seat and looked at my watch: five thirty-six. Bill Ackerman had shown up at the KRZY studios just as I'd been walking out the door. Crazy Carlos put him on the air and made the man do his own version of Carlos's hyena laugh before he'd given him the check. Honestly. The things people will do for money.

A small, neat secretary appeared and showed me to Gordon Lively's office. Mr. Lively was sitting behind his desk in an enormous room full of chrome and leather furniture, but he stood when I entered the room. The place had an unobstructed view of the river and maybe a quarter mile straight down, which I tried not to examine too closely.

"Miss Cartwright," he said, offering me a well manicured hand.

"Cath," I corrected.

"That's right: Cath. I forgot. Please, sit down."

I did.

Gordon Lively's hair was jet black with just the right amount of gray blended in at the temples. He had the barest hint of an accent and the

courtly manners of a Southern gentleman. It was the middle of May, and already he'd acquired a tan that many of us would kill for.

"Cath, I don't want you to get the wrong idea about me. I'm a man who believes in paying his fair share, and when I've done wrong, I try to make restitution."

I nodded, slipping a pad of paper and a pen out of my purse.

"A few months back, I was involved in an automobile accident. A fender bender, really; nothing serious. My Lexus was hardly scratched, though you'd never know it from what it cost me to fix it."

I gave him an understanding smile. Ah, the perils of owning a fine luxury automobile.

"The folks in the other car—there were two of them, a mother and daughter—seemed fine at the time. I gave them my insurance carrier's name and policy number. Since no one was injured, I thought that would be the end of it."

"But it wasn't."

He sighed and rubbed a hand across his forehead. "No, I'm afraid not. They went out and hired a lawyer, and the next thing I knew, they were suing me for sixteen million dollars."

My eyes widened. "Sixteen million?"

"That's right."

I started thinking about all the things I could buy with that much money, and couldn't come up with enough ways to spend even half of it. Either these folks were out to ruin Gordon Lively or they were greedy little bastards. More than likely, both.

"Sixteen million's kinda high," I said. "What sort of injuries are they claiming they sustained in the accident?"

"Well, the mother's being treated for spinal injuries, which I can understand, I suppose, but they're claiming that the daughter is aphasic."

I raised an eyebrow, and he pointed to his throat.

"She can't speak. According to her mother, she hasn't said a word since the accident."

"That's odd. What do her doctors say?"

"Well, that's the hell of it." Gordon Lively shook his head. "They can't agree on an explanation for her condition. A friend of mine who's been practicing psychiatry for twenty years says it could be a hysterical reaction, but the neurosurgeon she's seeing says he thinks the trauma of the accident damaged the language centers in her brain. He's running more tests to make sure."

"I take it you don't believe him."

He shrugged. "I don't know what to believe. The mother says the girl can't talk; maybe she can't. But I was there, Miss Cartwright—I was in the other car—and I didn't have so much as a headache to show for it. Something just doesn't smell right."

"I take it you'd like me to find out if this girl is faking."

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Faking" isn't exactly the way I'd put it, but exaggerating, yes. I think the girl—or her mother—is exaggerating the extent of her injuries."

I nodded. "Well, I don't see that it would be any problem to just follow the girl around for a couple of days; see if she's as incapacitated as she claims."

Gordon Lively cleared his throat, then refolded his hands. "Unfortunately, I can't give you a couple of days, Miss Cartwright. I was so sure this thing would never get to court that I didn't start looking for an investigator until the last possible moment." He looked at me sheepishly. "We've got a court date this Wednesday at ten."

That gave me only one day to find something that would convince these people to drop their suit. I shook my head.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lively. I don't think—"

"Even a settlement would be a victory at this point," he added anxiously. "Like I said, I'm happy to make restitution. I just don't think I owe these people a quarter of my net worth."

A quarter? My God. This guy was even better off than I'd imagined. Made me start feeling a little greedy myself.

"I charge sixty-five dollars an hour," I said, giving myself a thirty percent raise on the spot. "Ten hours of it in advance. Expenses are extra, and I'll give you a call before I start running up a tab, but I can't promise I can come up with much in just one day."

He tapped an index finger against his lower lip. "How about I make you a counter-proposal? I'll give you the check for ten hours, and if you come up empty by Wednesday morning, well..." He shrugged. "Then my lawyers will deal with it. But if you come up with evidence to prove this girl is exaggerating, I'll give you a five thousand dollar bonus. Over and above the rest." He grinned. "How does that sound, Miss Cartwright?"

I smiled. "Sounds great."

We shook hands, and I sighed, grateful for the breathing room this windfall was going to afford me. What the hell? For five grand I'd move in with

these people if I had to. I fished around in my briefcase for a contract.

Half an hour later I was heading out the door, check in hand.

Lucille and Suzannah Wilson—mother and daughter, respectively—lived in Unit 7 of Ray's Motel, a double row of rundown clapboard cottages that advertised "One & 2 Bedroom Kitchenettes and Sleeping Units—Pets OK" on the sign above the office. The street out in front was full of potholes, and the space between units wasn't wide enough to admit two men walking side by side. I parked in a place marked Visitors and poured a cup of coffee from the silver thermos I'd brought along. It was five forty-five A.M.

Gordon Lively hadn't been able to tell me anything about the women beyond where they lived and the names of the doctors who were treating them for their "injuries." I'd made a few calls the night before and found out that Lucille's chiropractor had a history of filing questionable whiplash claims; if she'd been the only one injured, I'd probably have been able to persuade her to settle on that basis alone. But it was Suzannah's problem that this case was go-

ing to hinge on, and so far I'd found nothing to discredit her neurosurgeon. As far as I could tell, he was on the up and up.

I was doing the obvious this morning: sitting, watching, hoping maybe Suzannah would come out and yell at the neighbor's dog. Sometimes it's just that easy. You're in the right place at the right time, and you catch the person off guard. Usually, though, I have to work harder for my supper. Somehow I was probably going to have to insinuate myself into these people's lives. I just didn't know where yet, or how.

At six twenty-one, the lights started coming on in Unit 7. In no time, it was filled with a cheery incandescent glow. I screwed the top back on the thermos and set it aside.

The curtains were still drawn across the windows on this side, and no one seemed to be in any hurry to open them. Too bad. It looked like we were in for a beautiful day. There were voices coming from somewhere in the back of the unit. I rolled down my window and strained to hear.

It was a radio, and underneath it, a voice, but if there was one person talking in there or five, I couldn't tell. It occurred to me that this might be a deliberate ploy to obscure the sounds inside the cottage. If so,

it was working. I rolled the window back up and pulled out a bagel.

At eight o'clock, I got out of the car and stretched my legs. I was getting restless, sitting there thinking about how I was going to spend my bonus while time ticked away. I walked to the end of the row of cottages and circled around back to see if I could find anything there.

There was an orange Pinto with some rear end damage parked behind Unit 7. It didn't take a genius to figure out who it belonged to. The rear bumper had been lifted a few inches and crushed into the trunk, making the trunk unusable, and there was a six inch crack in the rear window. The tailpipe was missing, and all four tires were bald.

I sidled up behind the cottage to see if there was any way to peek inside. No such luck. The curtains on that side were closed as well, and the radio was still going full blast. These people must be a joy to live next to, I thought as I circled back and got into the car.

At five minutes of ten, I got my first break. Lucille and Suzannah stepped out onto the front stoop and headed for the Pinto. Neither of them said a word as they got into the car and drove down the rutted road toward town. I started up my

Honda and followed at a discreet distance.

First stop was Fairfield Mall, a single level affair with a Sears at one end and a Montgomery Ward at the other. I parked five rows away and followed the women in through the automatic glass doors.

They wandered aimlessly for almost thirty minutes, looking at everything from bedroom furniture to engagement rings, no doubt planning how to spend their coming windfall. For a couple of gals who were living under pretty marginal conditions, they sure had expensive tastes.

At ten forty-seven, Suzannah ducked into Musicworld to root through the bins while her mother went to Woolworth's for a pack of cigarettes. I sat down on a bench and pretended to fish something out of my shoe.

The window display in front of me had a full-length picture of Crazy Carlos Rubio with the words HOW CRAZY IS HE? LISTEN TO KRZY AND FIND OUT! underneath. Poor Carlos looked as crazy as he sounded, with heavy black eyebrows and a bushy mustache that looked as if triplet caterpillars had taken over his face. But there was something else about him, too. Something that looked vaguely familiar. I resumed my shoe inspection as Suzannah came out

of the store and the women continued their stroll.

I'd rather die than have anyone follow me around all day, staring at my rear end. I think most of us, if we knew how bad we looked from behind, would probably never leave our homes. Lucille and Suzannah were no exception.

Both of them favored stretch pants and sleeveless blouses, but whereas Suzannah was appallingly thin, her mother was enormous. Lucille's upper arms hung down like wineskins from her narrow shoulders, and her chest and stomach had merged into one massive ring that hovered around the tops of her thighs. I could hear her labored breathing from thirty feet back as she strolled down the promenade.

Three doors from the end, the two of them turned in to the Cut 'n' Curl hair salon. I pretended to check out the shampoo display in the window while Lucille announced their arrival to the girl up front. They had appointments with someone named Becky, and it looked as if Lucille was heading in first. Maybe this would be my chance to get closer to the girl. The sign in front said NO APPOINTMENT NECESSARY. I decided to take them at their word.

Lucille was already in the chair, her ample figure clad in a black barber's drape. Suzannah was sitting in the corner, toes turned inward, perusing the pages of *True Romance*. I walked up to the front desk, and a girl with yellow fingernails asked me what I'd like.

"A shampoo and blow dry," I said, trying not to look around.

The girl ran a clawed finger down the list of names in the appointment book and checked her watch.

"Francine can take you in about five minutes."

"I'm not in a hurry," I said and took a seat opposite a dreamy-eyed Suzannah.

I picked up a magazine and flipped through it quickly before tossing it back onto the table. Suzannah turned another page. I sighed and dug through the pile.

"Hard to find anything in here that isn't out of date," I said.

Suzannah looked up at me and said nothing.

"Have you got anything good?" I asked, hoping for at least a murmured response.

She shook her head.

I pointed at the cover. "Well, you see? That issue's from *last year*. Can you believe it?"

The girl glanced idly at the cover and shrugged.

"I hope this Francine what's-her-name is good. Who are you seeing today?"

The girl hesitated a moment, then opened the magazine and resumed her reading.

"Miss Cartwright? I'm ready for you now."

A whitehaired girl I assumed was Francine was hovering a few feet away. I sighed. Wouldn't you know? The one time I'd get fast service. I followed her back to the shampoo bowl and set my purse on the floor.

"I'd recommend a conditioner," Francine said, digging her fingers through my hair. "Do you want one? It's fifty cents extra."

"Sure," I said. "Conditioner's fine."

She pulled out a copy of the same black cape that Lucille was modeling and draped it around my shoulders. I leaned back in the chair and rested my neck on the sink.

"I'm trying to remember if I was that rude when I was a teenager," I sighed.

Francine looked over at Suzannah and then back at me.

"Why? What happened?"

"I was just trying to make conversation, and she completely ignored me; didn't say a word."

Francine leaned over. "I don't know about the rude part," she

said confidentially, "but the reason she didn't speak to you is 'cause she can't."

"Can't?" I tried to look appropriately shocked. "Oh dear. I didn't know she was deaf."

The stylist shook her head and glanced in Lucille's direction. The woman was blabbing a mile a minute, oblivious to anything the two of us had to say.

"She's not. She and her mom were in an accident a couple of months ago. Some rich guy smashed into their car. Ever since then, she hasn't been able to say a word."

"Poor thing," I said. "I hope she'll be all right."

"Left her mom with a bad back, too," Francine continued, turning on the water. "Rich people think they can get away with anything."

I nodded and closed my eyes as the tepid water hit my scalp. So Lucille and Suzannah knew what Gordon Lively was made of...

Suzannah still hadn't uttered a word when Francine and I parted ways. My hair looked like it had been styled with a rake. Lucille was sitting up front, absorbed in the same *True Romance* that I'd last seen in her daughter's possession, and I'd run out of excuses to hang around. I headed back out

to the bench in front of Musicworld.

The mall was dead, and I'd been up since five fifteen; the urge to sleep was overwhelming. I didn't figure I'd get much action out of the Wilsons for at least another fifteen minutes. I leaned back and closed my eyes. Ah, blessed relief.

"Cath?"

My head jerked involuntarily.

He was smiling, whoever he was, and his soft brown eyes were dancing mischievously. Catching me napping seemed to have given him a real thrill. And I think my life is dull.

As if saying my name once was not enough, he repeated it.

"Cath Westerhouse?" Westerhouse is my maiden name. He grinned and pointed to his chest. "Carl Reubens. Mission Beach High School. Remember?"

I opened my eyes wide and stared at the person in front of me. Carl? It couldn't be. Carl Reubens was the goofiest kid in my high school class—Most Likely to Slip on a Banana Peel, or something like that—and for a short while, one of my closest friends. But that had been twenty-five years and a thousand miles ago. I stared at his long face; the heavy black eyebrows; the matching mustache...

"You're Carlos Rubio!" I gasped.

He made a face and shrugged. "It's just a stage name. My friends still call me Carl."

Good grief! Here I'd been listening to this guy's show every day for a month, and I'd had no idea who he was. I patted the bench next to me.

"Have a seat, Carl. My God, how did you recognize me?"

He grinned. "You haven't changed that much. Besides, I remembered what you look like when you're sleeping."

"Oh."

"So," he said, looking almost as awkward as I felt. "What have you been doing with yourself?"

"What? You want a quick synopsis of the last twenty years?"

He laughed. "Still as funny as ever, I see."

"How about you? What brought you up here?"

"The job, mostly."

The way he said it, I got the feeling there was a lot to that "mostly," but I figured I'd let it slide.

"So you're a DJ."

"Yeah." He rolled his eyes. "How about you? What do you do with your time? When you're not sleeping in shopping malls, that is."

"I'm a private investigator."

"No!"

"'Fraid so. In fact," I added, "I'm here on a job."

Carl crossed his arms and leaned back, obviously pleased. "I can't believe it. You. A private eye."

"Believe it." I glanced back at the Cut 'n' Curl. No one was coming, but I didn't want to be stuck here when Lucille and Suzannah made their exit.

As if sensing my restlessness, Carl stood up and pulled out his wallet. "Listen, here's my number. Give me a call; maybe we can get together for lunch or something."

I looked at the card. "Sure, Carl. I'd like that."

As he walked away, I had a sudden memory of his lips touching mine; long before he'd grown that hideous mustache, of course. What if I called and it turned out he was seeing someone? What if I called and he wasn't? I needed another complication in my personal life like I needed a hole in my head. Maybe I'd just lose his number and never have to make the call. I took a deep breath and turned my attention back to the task at hand.

When they'd finished at the hair salon, Lucille and Suzannah headed back to the car and drove to the Food King, three blocks away. I got myself a cart and threw things in at odd intervals while I followed the two

women down the aisles. Quickly and quietly they collected cigarettes, milk, doughnuts, luncheon meat, Wonder bread, ice cream, and beer. I frowned. That was odd. Lucille never hesitated to talk to anyone else, but when it was just the two of them, she didn't say a word. And that made me suspicious.

If Suzannah had truly been unable to speak, wouldn't her mother have spoken to her, out of habit if nothing else? And if Lucille was anxious to elicit a response from her daughter, wouldn't she have been bombarding her with words instead of shutting her away in silence? Instead, it seemed that Lucille was staying silent as a reminder for Suzannah to do the same. I was beginning to think Gordon Lively's suspicions were correct, but I still had no way of proving it.

The two women hauled their selections to the express check-out line, where they carefully separated the items according to those they could and could not pay for with food stamps. I had a pang, thinking of Gordon Lively and his gold-plated bathroom fixtures, but this was business. Nobody said the distribution of wealth was fair. I abandoned my own half-filled cart in the second aisle and followed them out to the parking lot.

Next stop was the gas station, and that's where I got my second break. Lucille was being rushed by the guy in line behind her and drove off without her gas cap. I scampered over and grabbed it—telling the man I'd deliver it to Lucille when I saw her next—and hopped into my car, my feverish little brain already formulating a plan.

Things had settled into their old routine back at Ray's Motel. The radio was blasting, and the Pinto was in its parking place, sans cap. I hefted the smelly thing in my hand as I walked up to the front door and knocked.

Lucille answered the door, a cigarette in one hand and a can of Lucky Lager in the other.

"Who're you?" she demanded, eyeing me warily.

I smiled my most winning smile and held the gas cap at arm's length. "Is this yours?"

She shoved the cigarette into her mouth and took the cap out of my hand, squinting at it through a curl of smoke.

"It sure is." She looked up. "Where'd you get it?"

"You left it back at the gas station. I tried to get your attention, but you drove off in a hurry." I stuck out my hand. "My name's Cath."

"Cath, huh? Yeah, that idiot behind me was chompin' at the

bit to get somewhere." She paused. "Do I know you?"

I frowned, nodding slowly, as if I too were just recognizing a familiar face.

"You were at the mall," she said.

My mouth fell open. "That's right; I remember you. At the Cut 'n' Curl. You're the one with the kid who—" I put a hand over my mouth. "Sorry," I finished lamely.

Lucille made a dismissive gesture with her wrist. "Don't worry about it. Not like it's a secret or anything." She hesitated for just a moment, then stepped back from the door. "You want to come in?"

I stepped through the door, and Lucille turned her head.

"Suzannah, turn it down! We've got company!"

She motioned for me to have a seat on the well-worn couch.

"Can I get you somethin'? A beer maybe?"

I shook my head. "Nothing for me, thanks." I looked in the direction of the music.

"Suzannah. That's a pretty name."

She nodded and blew about two quarts of smoke out her nose.

"Her daddy's from Georgia," she said as if that explained everything.

"I heard you two were in an accident or something."

"A car wreck. Some guy plowed into the back of us in broad daylight." She shook her head. "Left me near crippled with this back pain." She indicated her massive nether region. "I spend every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon at the chiropractor's office just so's I can get around."

I shook my head. "I hope the jerk who hit you is paying for it."

"Oh, he will," she said, her face the picture of unvarnished greed.

We sat there a few awkward moments; me trying to think of something else to say, Lucille puffing thoughtfully on her cigarette. The music had quieted down. I got the feeling I was on the verge of overstaying my welcome.

"Well, guess I'd better be off," I said, getting to my feet. "I'm sorry I took up so much of your time. I just wanted to see that you got your gas cap back."

Lucille lurched forward, teetering uncertainly on her feet. "Don't mention it. I appreciate you bringin' it by. Besides, I enjoyed the company."

We'd just reached the door when the air was split with a nerve-jangling cackle. I smiled, recognizing Crazy Carlos's patented hyena laugh.

Lucille rolled her eyes. "Can you believe that guy? Suzan-

nah spends every afternoon listening to his show. Sent him fifty, sixty postcards thinkin' he's gonna give her the money." She shook her head. "I tell her: you can't get somethin' for nothin'."

I smiled. Without knowing it, Lucille had just given me the rope I needed to hang her with.

It was ridiculously easy to get Carl to sign on to my plan. I guess there's a part of each of us that wants to be in on catching the bad guys. Lucille was gone, of course; I'd watched her leave for her appointment at the chiropractor's at two o'clock. The only possible snag was quickly resolved when Suzannah ran to the manager's office and borrowed a car to get to the studio. From there she hustled her buns down to the station and crowed her little heart out when Carlos handed her the check. Carlos got the whole thing on tape, which he gave to me when Suzannah drove off.

"This should do it," he said, handing me the cassette.

"Thanks, Carl. You saved my life on this one." I tucked the tape into my purse. When it was played for Lucille and Suzannah, I had no doubt they'd drop their suit like a hot potato.

Carl was grinning from ear to ear. "This was fun. Let me

know if you ever need my help again. I'm usually available on short notice."

"Thanks," I said. "But this was a special case. Luckily, most of my clients aren't as pressed for time as Gordon Lively."

His face fell. "Lively? As in Lively Enterprises?"

I shrugged, feeling a bit defensive. "Yeah. What's the matter? Is something wrong with that?"

Carl chuckled, laughing at my naivete. "Well, I suppose his money's as good as anybody's; but geez, Cath. The guy's a sleazy, ball-busting bastard. How'd you ever hook up with him?"

I thought back to Mal's recommendation. "A friend of mine sent him to me," I said. "How do you know so much?"

Carl shook his head. "He owns this whole friggin' station."

I'd thought a lot about how I was going to present the evidence of their duplicity to Lucille and Suzannah and decided not to spring it on them in court. I make it a point to let people hang on to their dignity whenever possible, and after what Carl had said, I wasn't so sure I could trust Gordon Lively to be big about it. I drove up to Ray's Motel and

parked in front of Unit 7. It was eight fifteen, and the sun was just beginning to set.

I could tell something was wrong the minute Lucille answered the door. Her face was puffy, and her eyes were rimmed with red. She seemed relieved to see it was only me at the door—as if she might have been expecting the bogeyman—and hustled me inside. I wondered if her demeanor had anything to do with Suzannah's on-air escapade.

"What's wrong, Lucille?" I asked, as innocently as possible.

Lucille pulled a Kleenex from a box on the table and dabbed at her eyes. "Oh, Cath. I don't know what I'm gonna do."

She seemed so distraught I figured I'd give her a few minutes before delivering the bad news. I motioned toward the couch, offering the seat as if we'd been in my home instead of hers. Suzannah peeked around the corner and stared at us forlornly, her long black hair falling down over one eye.

Lucille started to wheeze, and I patted her on the back. Between the excess weight and her serious nicotine habit, this woman was a candidate for the morgue express line. I got her to take a few deep breaths before telling me what the problem was.

"We're screwed," she said at last. "We've pissed away the best shot we ever had of getting out of here." She shot a look at the girl, who lingered in the hallway not five feet from my shoulder. "Damn! I swore I'd get him, and he got away."

"Who got away?" I asked, as if I didn't know.

"Suzannah's daddy."

"Your husband?" Up to then, I'd thought we were talking about Gordon Lively. Now it appeared I'd stumbled into something else.

Suzannah tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and started to cry.

"No, no..." Lucille shook her head in frustration, her breath still coming in labored gasps. "I'm sorry, Suzannah. I know I promised your mom and all, but I did the best I could."

I looked from one to the other. "What's going on, Lucille? What do you mean, you promised her mother? I thought *you* were her mother."

Lucille grabbed another Kleenex and began blubbering again. Clearly I was going to get nothing else from her. I stood up and walked over to the girl.

Suzannah, at sixteen, was almost half a head taller than Lucille, which put the two of us eye to eye. She was pale and thin, but the way she carried

herself was almost regal. When I stepped in front of her, she raised her chin slightly, as if mustering a dignity that came from somewhere outside of that motel room.

I hooked a thumb back in Lucille's direction. "Does this have anything to do with your little performance today on the radio?"

Her eyes widened, and her lips parted slightly. "How'd you know about that?"

I shook my head. "First, tell me what's wrong with your mother."

Suzannah sighed. "She's not my mother. She's just a friend of my mom's."

I nodded. "Okay, I'll bite. Where's your mother?"

"She's dead."

Her voice was like thin ice on a frozen pond: slick and hard, with something deadly right under the surface. I thought of my own son, Byron, just a year younger. How much would it take to make him as hard, I wondered. How much to make him so angry? I took a deep breath and glanced back at Lucille.

"I know it's none of my business, but I'd be willing to listen if you need to talk."

The girl shrugged. "Nothing much to tell. Mom died last year. Breast cancer. Aunt Lucille was her best friend.

Things were okay until she hurt her back in January. Then she went on disability, and we had to move in here." She looked around quickly. "We don't like it much."

I could see why. From the looks of things, the two of them had come about as close to hitting bottom as possible and still have a roof over their heads. I still didn't see what it had to do with her father, however, so I asked.

"My folks never married; they split when I was really little. Mom and I did just fine on our own. I never missed him." She took a deep breath and looked at Lucille, who had recovered enough to light up another coffin nail.

"When Mom got sick, she started to worry about money. She decided to sue my dad for support. Not for her, just for me. But my dad told her she'd ruin him if she did that. He said his wife would divorce him and take all his money. So he made her an offer: if she'd sign a piece of paper saying he wasn't my real father, he'd take care of me after she died."

Suzannah stopped and pressed a tear out of the corner of her eye.

"Anyway, when she died, I guess he kind of changed his mind. Aunt Lucille adopted me, and now I live with her."

I looked at Lucille. She seemed mortified.

"I figured it was the only way to get any money out of him," she said. "So I staged the accident. Wasn't that hard to do. Keeping this girl quiet, though . . ." She shook her head angrily. "Bastard didn't even recognize his own flesh and blood."

My head was spinning. "You mean Gordon Lively is Suzannah's father?"

"Yeah." Lucille frowned. "How'd you know his name?"

I stood in front of my house on Wednesday morning, listening to the trash truck as it made its way down the street. I still didn't know how I was going to pay my mortgage next month, but Gordon Lively's check had paid most of my outstanding bills and I still had half a tank of gas.

I had no idea whether anyone connected with the case had heard Suzannah on the radio, but I did know the cassette in my hand was the only physical evidence there was. When I told him what had happened, Carlos "accidentally" destroyed the master tape of the previous day's show. Now it was up to Lucille and Suzannah. And me.

The garbage truck came to a screeching halt in front of my driveway, and a burly blond man in a red shirt and Levi's

came over to collect my cans. He took them both and emptied them one by one into the back of the truck. I hesitated, thinking of all the things I could do with Gordon Lively's five thousand dollar bonus.

The guy in the truck gave me a curious smile.

"Is that it, lady?"

I shook my head. "Just one more thing," I said, and tossed the tape in with the rest of the garbage.

Spare Change

Chris Rogers

“**T**he Jag don’t belong here,” Murley was saying, big belly grazing the side mirror as he faced the young cop. “Anybody could see that. Sticks out like a damn poodle at a dogfight.”

Jeff Rickey leaned his fifteen-year-old body across the hood of the Chevy he was detailing to swipe at a nonexistent smudge on the polished windshield. He’d never witnessed a real life crime investigation before and didn’t want to miss a word.

Officer Packet stooped, hands on uniformed thighs, to peer in the Jaguar’s driver-side window. Careful, Jeff noticed, not to touch anything and spoil the chance of lifting latent fingerprints. Jeff liked that. It meant the officer had some experience at crime scenes, and maybe something could be learned from him.

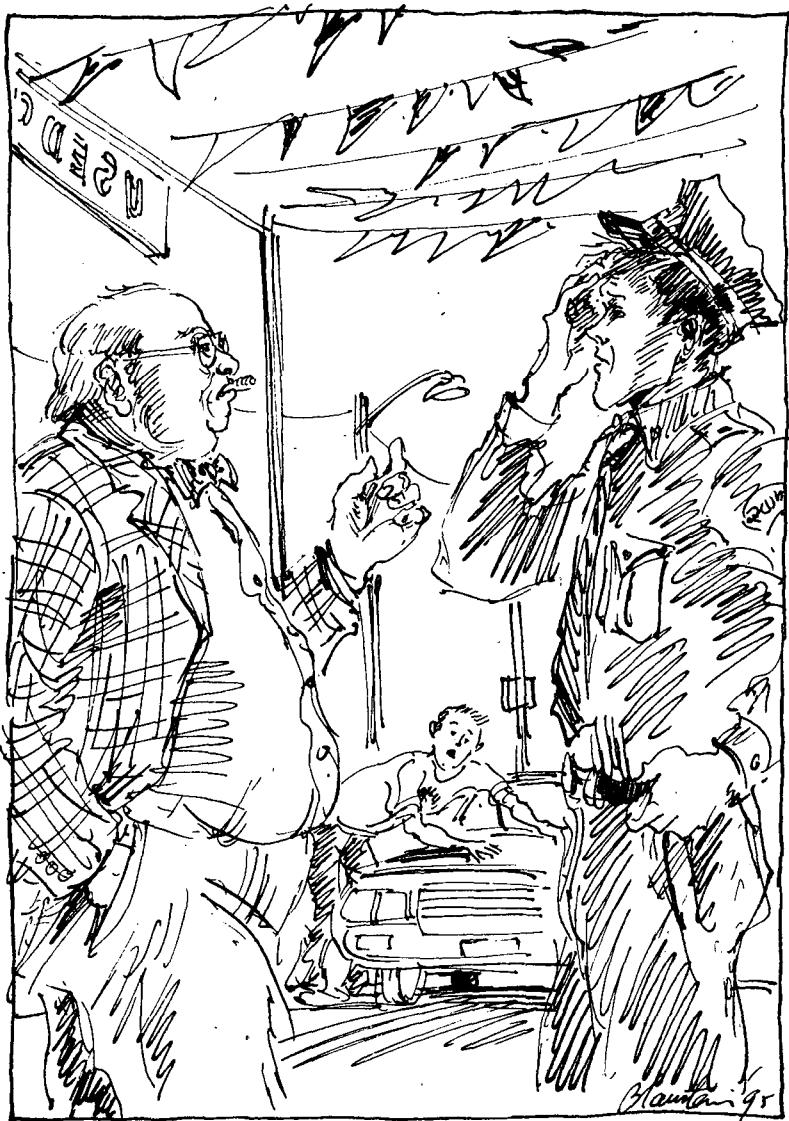
“Answer me this,” Murley said, meaty lips pooching in and out as he chewed on the stump of a carrot. He’d stopped smoking cigars, doctor’s orders, but said he couldn’t get through the day without something between his teeth. “Why would any sane human being steal an eight-year-old Dart and leave this spanking new Jag in its place? Don’t make sense.”

The officer straightened to his full six feet plus. Gazing around the car lot, he unbuttoned his shirt pocket to pull out a pencil and a small notepad.

Rookie, Jeff thought miserably, getting a first-time straight-on look at the cop’s youthful face. Just his luck. But Packet appeared intelligent and not completely green, and anyway, every cop had to be a rookie sometime.

“Those chains.” Packet nodded toward the north entrance where fifty-gauge chain links lay piled beside the foot-high steel barrier that kept thieves from driving Murley’s Used Cars off the lot at night. “Were they secured when you left here last night?”

“Tighter’n a new belt after Thanksgiving dinner.” Murley hitched his pants an inch higher over an expansive gut. “Hell, it’s the last thing I do of a night. Drag the chains across the exits, snap on the west side padlock, drive my Caddy out, and lock up the



HE'D NEVER WITNESSED A REAL LIFE CRIME INVESTIGATION BEFORE AND
DIDN'T WANT TO MISS A WORD.

north side. Same routine every night, ten P.M., come hail or kinfolk."

"Who else has a key to those locks?"

"Nobody."

"Keep a spare key in the office?"

Murley plucked the mangled carrot stump from his mouth and spit. "Keep a spare set of everything locked up in the desk drawer."

"Locked." The officer made a note on his pad. "The drawer's always locked?"

"Hell no, not during the daytime. We got to get in and out of that desk to get applications and such."

"So any one of your salesmen could have borrowed the key long enough to make a copy."

Murley tongued a speck of carrot from his lip to his fingertip. "Ain't none of my salesmen dumb enough to steal a Dart and leave off a Jag."

Packet made another notation. Jeff thought it was time the officer called in the license number and had Records run a trace on the Jaguar's plates.

As soon as Jeff finished school and could pass the exams, he was going to be a cop. Not a patrol cop, but a genuine crime investigator. He was good at figuring things out. Two years earlier he had tracked down the Pattersons' cat when it disappeared for three days, found it a few doors down, accidentally locked in a neighbor's house when they left on vacation.

Catching Murley frowning at him, Jeff dropped to his knees and rubbed vigorously at the Chevy's polished wheel cover. He couldn't see quite as well now, but he could hear the oystershell ground cover crunching under the officer's hard-soled shoes as he circled the Jaguar, scribbling on his tablet.

"It's got a flat," the cop said, apparently spying the right front wheel.

"Yep." Murley's tone said it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure that one out. "These fancy foreign jobs get flats just like the home-grown variety when somebody slashes the tire wall."

Jeff watched the reflection in the Chevy's chrome as the officer folded his long body to examine the three inch gouge. He made another note on his pad and stood up.

"You have a look inside the car before you called us? Try to find out who it belongs to?"

"Didn't touch nothing," Murley said. "Told the kid not to touch nothing, either. Don't belong to me, don't want no part of it."

But Jeff watched Murley's eyes roaming over the sleek sports car, taking in the wire wheels and twin pipes, probably thinking that half the cars on the lot, lumped up and sold as a package, wouldn't bring in as much as this gem was worth.

Gem or not, Jeff didn't like Jaguars.

His sister's big-shot boyfriend—Sangriff—thought Jags were boss. Top down, showing off his third-degree tan like some kind of South American sun god, he'd pick up Jeff's sister and take her tooling around until all hours, to places Mom would have shrieked to hear about had it not been the golden boy courting her daughter. Make enough trips south of the border, anybody'd look golden and glossy, Jeff tried to tell Sis. But all she could see were the fancy presents Sangriff brought back, big-shot international trader that he was. What exactly was Sangriff trading, Jeff had wondered. Nobody made that much money in a legit business.

He stood up to polish the Chevy's side mirror and watched Packet stride toward his blue and white squad car, parked near all the clunkers with oil or transmission leaks on the grass where drips wouldn't show. Leaning across the front seat, the cop scooped up the radio's hand mike and relayed the Jaguar's license number. Faint static issued as somebody replied.

Jeff listened hard, wishing he could think of a reason to amble closer, but Murley would fine him an extra hour of unpaid overtime if he caught Jeff slacking. The fat old man had moved to the front bumper of the Jaguar, giving the car a wily eye that meant he was scheming something, probably trying to figure a way to turn a dollar from his unlikely stroke of luck before Providence teed up for another swing.

Murley didn't miss a trick when it came to wheeling and dealing. But Jeff had to give the man his due, he wasn't as greedy as other dealers along used car row. Murley never sold a car without a seventy-two-hour warranty, never repossessed one until a payment was three days late. And Jeff was grateful for having a weekend job that didn't cut too deep into his schoolwork. Mom wouldn't have let him keep it otherwise.

Reaching inside the Chevy, Jeff started the engine, as if he hadn't already warmed up all the cars so they'd start fast and run smooth. Then he lifted the hood and pretended to tinker. Actually, the idle did sound a little rocky, like maybe the carb was mixing too rich. Jeff adjusted it, then switched off the engine and began to detail the already detailed interior.

"You know an Arnold Tanninger?" The officer's hard-soled shoes crunched across the shell.

Jeff slid nearer the window, skimming an Armor All rag over the dash pad.

"Don't recall knowing anyone by that name," Murley said. "Unless maybe a customer from some time back. Paid cash, maybe. Nobody I'm holding paper on now."

"Tanninger's a parolee, petty theft, suspected of small-time drug dealing. Last known address is less than a mile from here."

"Petty theft?" Murley's tone was incredulous. "And this car belongs to him?"

"The *plates* belong to a car registered to Tanninger. An Oldsmobile Cutlass."

"You mean the car and the plates don't match." Murley's eyebrows dipped together like two caterpillars at a square dance.

Footsteps crunched closer, and Jeff peeked out to see the officer standing a few feet away, looking at the Jaguar's door, thumbs tucked under his belt, lips thinned to an exasperated slash in his lean face. He wants to look inside, Jeff thought, examine the car for clues, bumper to bumper. That's what I'd do. But first he'll run the chassis number. That will take longer than the plates, and he'll have to open the Jaguar to find it.

"Got a slim jim inside, you want to jimmy that lock," Murley said.

The officer darted him a stern look.

"Hell," Murley hedged, "customers always locking keys inside their car, wanting us to get 'em out." He shrugged his thick shoulders.

The officer turned his frown back on the car door.

"So," Murley said, "you think this guy Tanninger stole the Jag, put his own plates on it, then dumped it here with a slashed tire?"

"We've got somebody checking on Tanninger," the officer said.

Jeff could have told them where to find Arnold Tanninger—pumping gas at the Exxon four blocks down. When he wasn't pumping gas, he was peddling crack. Tanninger had caught up with Jeff one day leaving the schoolyard after a hassle with the phys. ed. coach.

"Hey, kiddo," Tanninger's smelly arm snaking around Jeff's shoulders. "That was a bum deal you got back there."

Jeff tried to shrug him off, but the arm stuck like nettles.

"Kinda stuff gets you down," Tanninger said. "Coach got on my case, too. Kicked me out, so I set myself up in business. Who needs

school when you can make more bread on the street than any of those suits in their high-rise cages? Whatcha say we hang out, get mellow, talk some business?"

"Get lost," Jeff had told him, adrenaline still rushing from the hassle over his American history grades. No pass, no play. He was doing fine in his other subjects, but what use was memorizing dates of old wars and treaties and such?

Tanninger pulled out a knife, a nasty thing with a short curved blade. "Why you laying down that kinda shit, kiddo, when I'm trying to be nice to you?"

Jeff was scared. It had been stupid to pop off to Tanninger. Now he was in deep trouble.

By that time they were passing the Patterson house, where Jeff had become a hero after finding the cat. He had also helped Mr. Patterson plant Spanish daggers under all the windows to ward off burglars when he worked late and had to leave his family at home alone. The concrete sidewalk lay close to the Pattersons' house, Spanish daggers grown up man-size after two years, sharp pointy leaves stretching in all directions.

One eye on the ugly knife, Jeff pretended to trip on a deep crack. He feigned a fall and jabbed his elbow into Tanninger's side, shoving him into the daggers and turning fast, a well-placed kick finishing the job. He hadn't hung around to find out how Tanninger freed himself, but he heard later that Mrs. Patterson called 911 with an attempted burglary. The wicked knife bearing Tanninger's prints hadn't won any favors with the cops.

But a fast-talking lawyer had gotten the attempted burglary charge thrown out of court, and Jeff knew it was only a matter of time before Tanninger would be leaning on him again. One of the daggers' leaves had missed slicing out Tanninger's eye by a gnat's breadth, leaving a deep scar along his cheekbone. Jeff, on his way to Murley's Used Cars every weekend, had to bike right past the Exxon where Tanninger pumped gas.

Packet had returned from the squad car with a pair of thin rubber gloves. Now he slipped them on and grasped the Jaguar's door handle. The door swung open.

"Guess you won't need the slim jim," Murley said. "And look there, the keys're hanging right there in the ignition."

The officer removed the keys before copying down the chassis number and strolling across the shell drive to call it in.

Turning on the hand vac, Jeff ran it over the Chevy's floor mats, hoping the noise would keep Murley from asking why the car's detailing was taking so long. He watched the side mirror until he saw the officer's reflection returning, then clicked off the vac and began polishing the inside glass.

"No report on any stolen Jaguar," the officer said, glaring at Murley like maybe he thought somebody was pulling his leg. "Computer's running the body number."

Murley swiveled the carrot to the other side of his face. "Suppose nobody claims it? Guess by rights that makes it mine, wouldn't you say?"

The officer didn't say anything, his smirk indicating he thought Murley was a card or two shy of a full deck. He leaned inside the Jaguar to look around, not touching anything, then squatted to run his gloved hand under the driver's seat and came out with a pint-size bottle of Wild Turkey. Holding it up by two fingers, he checked the contents—half empty—and put the bottle back where he found it.

"Don't make sense," Murley said. "Anybody losing a car like this would be tearing up the police station trying to get it back."

Once again the officer didn't say anything. Jeff figured he agreed, though, that it was strange, the car's loss not being reported.

"Unless the owner didn't know the car was gone," Murley added.

"What time did you open this morning?"

"Noon. Always open at noon on Saturdays and stay open till midnight. Folks buy a lot of cars after a Saturday night date, a nice meal and a few drinks."

Jeff checked the Chevy's dash clock. Nearly three thirty. Even a late sleeper should've noticed by now that his big-shot Jaguar was not parked where he left it.

The officer opened the passenger door, ran his hand under the seat, and came up empty. He opened the glove box, thumbed through the papers, closed it.

"You sure you didn't take a peek inside here before calling it in? Maybe thinking one of your sales boys had played a little prank?"

"Hell, they ain't got time for no pranks. They're busy selling cars." Murley pointed across the lot to where one of his salesmen was showing a Toyota to a young couple. His gaze fell on Jeff, sitting inside the Chevy, and he frowned. "Hey, boy! Come outa there."

Jeff scrambled out. The police radio let out a loud squawk, and the cop went jogging toward the squad car.

Murley waved Jeff closer. The stumpy carrot between his fingers had turned brown and looked so much like a dead cigar that Jeff half expected smoke to curl up from it. After fishing a role of bills out of his pants pocket, Murley peeled off a twenty.

"Run over and get us some burgers. My stomach thinks I forgot how to chew." He glanced at Packet, mike in hand, standing outside the squad car. "Get a couple for him, too."

Jeff shoved the bill deep in his pocket, thinking it was just his luck the case would probably bust wide open while he was gone. He shuffled past the squad car, headed for his bike.

"Sangriff?" the officer was saying, writing it on his notepad. "S-a-n-g-r-i-f-f, Corland. You notified him his Jag turned up at Murley's Used Cars?"

The radio squawked in reply, but Jeff was already on his bike and racing down the shell driveway.

Corland Big-shot Sangriff and Arnold Tanninger. Nobody would ever've paired those two. Jeff had seen Sangriff at the Exxon often enough, though, Tanninger airing the tires and checking the hood, golden boy Sangriff standing around with his hands in his pockets. The day after returning from one of his buying trips, Sangriff always turned up bright and early at the station, getting the Jaguar serviced.

Jeff wished he knew what Sis saw in the creep. If Dad were still around, he wouldn't be taken in by the flashy car and designer clothes; he would've noticed Sangriff's too-bright eyes after one of his long stints in the john. The day his father died, he'd made Jeff promise to take care of his older sister, but that was tough with Mom working against him, thinking Sangriff was Sis's ticket to the good life.

Jeff slowed at a stop sign, checked both ways, and sailed through the intersection. Murley would be ticked off that he stopped at Jack-in-the-Box instead of going two blocks farther to Burger King, but Jeff could see the drive-through was empty. With luck, he could be in and out and back at Murley's before anything important went down.

One more month and he'd be driving his own car right now. One month until his sixteenth birthday, when he'd be old enough to get his driver's license. By then he'd have enough money socked away to buy that honey Mustang on the back lot—not on one of Murley's

sucker plans but straight-out cash. He'd miss the wind in his face and the music of his spoke flaps, but having his own car was a milestone right up there with finishing school and becoming a cop.

When he sailed into the car lot and braked beside the office, another squad car was parked on the shell drive, and Sangriff was climbing out of it. The rookie cop had the Jaguar's trunk open.

"You must have a lot of tire trouble," he said as Sangriff walked up. "Carrying around two spares."

Sangriff grinned, teeth lined up and gleaming like new piano keys. "I spend a lot of time on the road late at night. Can't be too careful."

Jeff wandered closer, holding the bag of burgers. Besides the two tires, the trunk held a bumper jack, a pouch full of wrenches, and several boxes of odds and ends that belonged in a garage. One of the spares was a small emergency model, good for a few miles at best. The other was full size. Both were mounted on wheels that matched the four on the ground.

"That little doughnut won't be doing you much good," the cop said. "Got a hole in it as big as the one up front."

Sangriff's smile dimmed a notch. He walked to the front of the Jaguar to stare down at his ruined tire. A flicker of real anger hardened his mouth for a moment; then the lips pulled back and quirked up at the corners, and he turned on the old charm brighter than ever.

"I suppose I should count my blessings that the car wasn't stripped. Isn't that what usually happens?"

The officer from the second squad car, older and stockier than Packet, walked along the other side of the Jaguar, looking it over. Jeff wondered whether he was admiring the car or hanging around for more official reasons.

"This theft has a few other peculiarities," Packet said. "You know a man named Arnold Tanninger?"

"Tanninger?" Sangriff hesitated an instant. "Yes, I suppose you could say I know him. He takes care of my car, changes the oil and keeps it roadworthy."

"Tanninger's been picked up for questioning," the second cop contributed. "Heard it called in. He denies knowing anything about the theft."

Jeff watched a bead of sweat travel down the side of Sangriff's hairline. His golden tan seemed suddenly paler against the stark white of his shirt collar. He unbuttoned his snappy blue Italian

sport coat and adjusted the knot of his signature tie.

The greasy burgers were bleeding through the sack. Jeff handed them to Murley. The carrot stump bobbed and rolled to the other side of Murley's mouth.

"Say," he said, obviously eager to get inside and chow down now that the Jaguar had slipped firmly from his grasp. "The kid here can change that flat, get you back on the road. Looks like you still got one good shoe left to put on the ground."

Packet glanced at the other cop. "That's another of those peculiarities I mentioned. Why not disable all three tires if the objective was to keep the car from going anywhere? Otherwise, what's the point in slashing any of them?"

Sangriff's forehead wrinkled; his sissy mouth pursed with consideration.

"I understand what you're saying, officer. Looks like somebody wasn't thinking too clearly. But if, as you say, Tanninger had something to do with this, I suppose I'm not terribly surprised. He isn't what I'd call the brightest person I've ever met."

Murley rattled the grease-stained sack growing cold in his hands.

"Listen, fellows, I'm going to mosey inside. You come when you're ready, have a cold drink and a bite to eat, and I'll give you a rundown on the Dart that disappeared last night when Mr. Sangriff's car was left off." He hustled toward the office, his short legs making surprisingly good time.

Jeff stood out of the way, waiting for Packet to decide whether he should change the flat. Sangriff hadn't noticed him, hadn't placed him as Sis's brother, even though just last month he had given Jeff a hundred dollar bill to detail the Jaguar. Spare change, he'd called it. Big-shot showoff. The car had been road grimy, sure, but Sangriff's real motive was having an hour or two alone in the house with Sis while Mom was at a movie.

Jeff, full of his own motives, had obliged eagerly.

It hadn't taken long at all to find the shallow false bottom in the Jaguar's trunk. Customs officers, acquainted with Sangriff and his big-shot international trading company, likely wouldn't bother looking past the trunk full of cartons and spare tires.

After a quick trip to the hardware store for polish, Jeff had pocketed copies of Sangriff's keys, house, garage, and Jag. All he had to do then was wait for golden boy's next trip down south.

Jeff pictured the sick look on Sangriff's face that morning when he opened his garage, ready to make his drop, and found his precious sports car missing, along with its even more precious cargo. Tanninger must be half crazy about now, wondering how the tags from the Cutlass ended up on Sangriff's Jaguar.

"You want me to change that flat now?" Jeff said. "Looks like the spare could use some air. Seal doesn't look tight."

Sangriff's upper lip was beaded with sweat, despite the cool breeze that wafted across the car lot.

"Ahhh, now that I think about it, that tire's not in real good shape," Sangriff said. "Why don't I call a tow truck and have the car taken to my garage where they can check it out, make sure the creep that stole it didn't pour sugar in my gas tank or something else crazy like that?"

But Jeff had already picked up the spare. "Whoa. That's as heavy as a truck tire." He glanced at the rookie cop.

Lips pressed into a tight slash in his bony face, Packet met Jeff's gaze. His eyes flickered with vague understanding. He swung the spare out of Jeff's grasp and bounced it on the ground. It thudded heavily.

"You go ahead and call that tow truck, Mr. Sangriff. Might as well let the kid check out the spare, save you a little time and money." He rolled the tire toward the garage at the back of the office.

"Naw, really." Sangriff's snappy Italian coat showed dark circles around the armpits. "That's not necessary. I'd feel better if my mechanic took care of the whole thing."

But Packet continued onward as the older cop responded to a squawk from his car radio.

Jeff settled the wheel over the pneumatic tire changer, noticing that Sangriff had hung back, looking like he wanted to run. Jostling the wheel into better position, he pressed the foot feed and heard a sharp hiss, rubber separating from metal.

Footsteps crunched across the shell as the older cop joined them.

"Found the Dart," he said. "About four blocks down the street. People opened their garage door and the Dart was sitting in the driveway, blocking their exit. The Jaguar's tags were laying on the back seat." He placed a reassuring hand on Sangriff's shoulder, urging him forward. "Beginning to look like a prank after all, Mr. Sangriff. Maybe you ought to think about who you know that'd go to such lengths to cause you a little grief."

Jeff looked up at Sangriff as he inserted the tire tool under the metal. Sangriff's eyes were glued miserably to the tire popping free of the spare's rim and to the avalanche of small plastic bags filled with powdery white crystals.

The rookie cop grinned at Jeff as he picked up one of the plastic bags.

"I'd say somebody caused you more than just a little grief, Mr. Sangriff," he said.

SOLUTION TO THE MAY "UNSOLVED":

Danny Boldoni is the brother in the yellow stand.

BROTHER	STAND	SHIRT	TIE
Alfie	green	white	red
Bubba	red	orange	yellow
Chaz	orange	red	white
Danny	yellow	green	orange
Eddie	white	yellow	green

BROTHER	COFFEE	PEANUTS	ICE CREAM
Alfie	60 (\$18)	70 (\$31½)	80 (\$48)
Bubba	50 (\$15)	60 (\$27)	70 (\$42)
Chaz	100 (\$30)	90 (\$40½)	50 (\$30)
Danny	70 (\$21)	50 (\$22½)	100 (\$60)
Eddie	80 (\$24)	100 (\$45)	90 (\$54)

BROTHER	POPCORN	HOT DOGS	TOTAL
Alfie	50 (\$37½)	100 (\$90)	\$225
Bubba	80 (\$60)	90 (\$81)	\$225
Chaz	70 (\$52½)	80 (\$72)	\$225
Danny	90 (\$67½)	60 (\$54)	\$225
Eddie	60 (\$45)	70 (\$63)	\$231

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the July issue.

As investigator for Affiliated Life & Casualty Insurance, my job is far from routine. Admittedly, I have a jaundiced view of humanity. From the very start I suspect fraud. More often than not, I'm right.

Some cases seem like a record you've heard over and over. The same dismal tune but you can't quite place it. Like the three separate claims that kept bothering me. They also bothered my bosses, since they had to fork over fifty thousand dollars to each of the widows. Let me lay it out for you.

First, on November 13, 1987, dark-haired Roxanne Steuben married Samuel Nawle, a merchant in Indianapolis. He insured his life for fifty thousand dollars. On March 15, 1988, while Mrs. Nawle was attending a Ladies' Circle meeting at her church, *someone* shot husband Samuel. Murder never solved.

Next, on June 21, 1989, redhaired Susan Tillet married Paul Becker, a grain dealer in Sioux Falls. He likewise took out fifty thousand dollars' life insurance. On September ninth of that same year, while wife Susan was out of town (that was confirmed), *someone* shot Mr. Becker. Case still on the books of the Sioux Falls police department.

Then, on May 19, 1991, blonde Teresa Ratcliff married Victor Danzer, a high school teacher in Seattle. Again, he insured his life for exactly fifty thousand. On August eighteenth of that year, while Teresa was at a clinic for a general checkup, *someone* shot Victor through the head. Case never solved.

You see the pattern? A bride of three months is suddenly a widow, with a perfect alibi—not to mention fifty thousand dollars of my company's money. Never mind the different hair colors; they sell them by the bottle in your neighborhood drug store.

What makes me suspicious? Because within days after cashing the insurance check, Roxanne Steuben Nawle, Susan Tillet Becker,

and Teresa Ratcliff Danzer each disappeared without leaving a forwarding address. Nor could I trace where the three young widows came from. The birth certificates submitted when they applied for the marriage license—each one phony as a three-dollar bill.

So I had been on the lookout for a short-term bride and her accomplice with the handy .32. Finally I got a lead, and as often happens, it was through a money-hungry snitch rather than my own legwork.

Roxanne-Susan-Teresa had confided in a friend how to get rich quick. "Why bother with that daily grind in some stuffy old office?" she asked. "You can live royally just by taking on a new man for a few months." She spilled her arrangement. Then she had dropped the name Affiliated Life & Casualty Insurance Company.

Within the hour, this "friend" phoned Affiliated and was connected to my office. She was probing for a possible reward.

"Sure," I told her; "if I can lay my hands on them. How does twenty grand sound?"

"Great!" She sounded delighted, and I could picture dollar signs flashing in her greedy mind. "Roxanne," she went on, "told me all about it. She's got a partner who does the shooting. Roxanne and her newest husband are honeymooning at the Desert Sun Health Club right here in Phoenix. Her partner is also there with his wife."

I was skeptical, but I had little to lose. "How will I know them?" I asked her.

"Well, I—I'm a little scared to go there and point them out, but you can spot them easily yourself. Roxanne and her fourth hubby arrived in a car with South Carolina plates. The killer's car has Wyoming plates."

She gave an address where I could contact her later. I flew to Phoenix on the next available flight, rented a car, and signed in at the Desert Sun Health Club.

Six couples had registered. I noted that their cars in the parking lot all had different plates. The couples were all gathered around the pool, the women in bikinis and the men in shorts. One couple was Mr. and Mrs. North; one man was Fred; and one woman was Flora.

I sauntered over to join them without being conspicuous. By patiently listening, I learned the following:

- (1) No man and wife have the same first initial, so Abe is not married to Alice, Bert to Betty, and so on.

- (2) Abe, Bert, and Chet are married to Mrs. Purdy, the woman from Tennessee, and the flirty blonde in the blue bikini.
- (3) The women wearing the orange, red, and white bikinis are the wives of Abe (who is not married to Elena), Mr. Mahler, and the man from Texas (who is not married to Alice).
- (4) The women from South Carolina, Tennessee, and Utah include Earl's wife (who is not Dolly), Mrs. O'Hara, and the curvaceous beauty in the white bikini.
- (5) Alice, Betty, and Clara are (in one order or another) Mrs. Rogers, the killer's wife, and the tall woman in the skimpy yellow bikini.
- (6) Don, the man from Virginia (who is not married to Alice), and the husband of the woman in the green swimwear include Mr. O'Hara, Mr. Queen, and Mr. Rogers.
- (7) Neither Betty nor the wife from Utah is wearing red.
- (8) The wife from Virginia is not the one in the blue bikini.
- (9) Betty is not Mrs. Queen.
- (10) Bert is not Mr. O'Hara.

By that time I knew enough. As I arrested the guilty duo, the husband from South Carolina was indignant. "That's mah wife, suh! What do you think yo'ah doin'?" he demanded.

"Just saving your life, that's all," I replied.

*Who was the next intended victim of the murderous wife?
Who was her gun-wielding accomplice?*

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Papa Mozart in France

Ben Pastor

To Frau Anna Maria Mozart, Getreidegasse by the Loechelplatz, Salzburg. October 1763.

Dear Wife,

As I promised, here is a letter to inform you that Wolfgang and I arrived in France in fair health and fine spirits, and we expect to catch the post for Paris tomorrow. Wolfgang has been doing much better and has quite recovered from the stomach upset that plagued him during the trip across Switzerland. He has been practicing the harpsichord nearly every day and sounds marvelous.

You will not believe what has befallen us during the last twenty-four hours of our stay here at the Reine Margot Inn. Yesterday morning, as I prepared to put on my frock to go downstairs for breakfast, the voice of the innkeeper's sister—you remember her from last year's trip, she's a stout, pleasant woman with a liking for Polish-style ribbons in her dress—called me in alarm from outside our room's door.

"Herr Mozart, Herr Mozart!"

I recognized the urgency in her tone and opened the door at once.

What a scene she presented, my dear wife! Her looks were in disarray, as if she'd been running up the stairs without a care for her hair or skirts.

"Mademoiselle LeBoeuf!" I said in surprise. "What has happened?"

"Oh, Herr Mozart, such a dreadful tragedy! Please look out your window."

I humored her and leaned over the windowsill. You will recall that there is a charming rose garden on the west side of the building, kept by the innkeeper himself. Well, Monsieur LeBoeuf was lying on the gravel path nearly under our window, sprawled on his stomach in his shirtsleeves. A knife was planted in his burly back. I recoiled in horror as his sister cried out, "My poor murdered brother! Who would kill such a man as him?"

Of course by this time Wolfgang had awakened and was sitting up in bed, rubbing his eyes. He asked at once what the matter was, and I hushed him as best I could. But he's too smart for that. He jumped right out of the quilts and ran to the window, and before I could stop him, he was staring below.

Blessed innocence! At eight years of age even violent death doesn't impress us as final. In all seriousness he turned to me and said, "Papa, why did Monsieur LeBoeuf go picking flowers while he was dying?"

I gently took our son away from the window, explaining that it had only been a convulsed motion at the time of death that had caused the poor man to strip a rose from the closest shrub.

Mademoiselle LeBoeuf was weeping in her apron. I offered to accompany her downstairs, where by this time servants and guests had gathered in the dining hall. She managed to explain to me that she'd gotten up earlier than usual that morning and had noticed that her brother's bed in the room next door was untouched; accordingly, she'd gone looking for him downstairs, and seeing the back door ajar, she'd walked out into the rose garden, where she'd made the awful discovery.

In the dining room the news had already circulated among those present. The kitchen maids cried, and the footmen hung their heads. The two opera singers from Vienna whom Wolfgang and I had met at the table the night before were there—Frau Wentzl (who says she's twenty-five but must be at least a decade older) and her redheaded companion Fraulein Putz, who is very thin for her profession. Both women were talking at once and expressing their distress. The dark-faced Italian in the group, a Signor Marini from Florence, stood aside from the others and looked uncomfortable. We hear he's a gambler and only comes into his own after the dinner hour, when pipes and playing cards are brought out. The only sanity was shown by our traveling companion from Switzerland, Monsieur Provins.

He helped Mademoiselle LeBoeuf to sit and asked the maids to fetch a physician.

"It's impossible," the poor woman wailed. "There's no physician within fifty leagues, and what good would it do anyway? My poor brother is dead, and no cure can bring him back."

"Then," I said, "we must at least fetch the police."

This suggestion was even more distressing to Mademoiselle LeBoeuf. She cried out that this had always been a respectable estab-

lishment and that calling the gendarmes would only bring a bad name to the Reine Margot.

"I'm an unmarried lady, and my brother and I lived by this inn," she wept. "What would happen if we had no more visitors? The pension he received after he left service as gardener at court wouldn't allow us to live on it. No, Herr Mozart. I know how kind you are, and how you and your dear wife and family delighted us with your music during your last stay—wouldn't you consider trying to find out who killed my brother without calling the police?"

I exchanged a puzzled look with Monsieur Provins, who's a well-to-do merchant and a man of common sense. He said, "She's not wrong, Herr Mozart. We can't risk her losing her livelihood."

Well, my dear Anna Maria, you know that I've always been a man more concerned with arpeggios than intrigue. You'd suppose I'd have right away told the good woman that I had no idea how to investigate a murder. But her tearful face and the anxious expressions of those around me convinced me that I ought, if nothing else, to give it a try.

At this point I realized that little Wolfgang had disappeared from the room. Aware of his childish curiosity, I immediately walked out into the rose garden, and sure enough he was there observing the body. Hands clasped behind his back, he seemed to be gravely considering how this jovial man who'd been bouncing him on his knee the night before could now be lying cold with a common kitchen knife in the middle of his back.

Before I could reach him and take him away from the victim, Wolfgang kneeled and took the rose from the dead man's hand.

"The night dew kept it alive," he commented, showing me the large-headed, dark pink flower. "Look, Papa, it's so heavy it cannot hold its face up. Have you ever seen such a large-headed rose?"

Within minutes, standing with her in the sitting room, I reassured Mademoiselle LeBoeuf that I'd do my best.

"But if you want to help," I added, "you must make sure that I have a chance to speak to all those who could be suspected of doing away with your poor brother. Please tell me what happened last night after Wolfgang and I retired."

The woman dried her tears. "Well, Herr Mozart, you and the boy went upstairs early because of his stomachache. The married wenches and footmen live in the village, so they walked to their homes shortly after supper. The two unmarried servants sleep in

a room two doors down from mine, and I'd easily hear if either of them slipped out. You recall that Signor Marini was showing card tricks to the company. The two ladies were sitting together and giggling—which is extraordinary considering how they'd been at each other's throats until that afternoon—and Monsieur Provins smoked his pipe by the fireplace. All of them were still in the dining room with my poor brother, who loved the company, when I left to go to bed."

"So, in theory, any of them could be suspects."

The suggestion came to her as a tremendous shock. How she could not have thought of it is beyond me, but she opened her eyes and mouth wide.

"Why would any of our guests kill the innkeeper?"

"I don't know," I said. "But unless you can come up with another suspect, I fear that we must look among them."

She said nothing for a little while. In the meantime Wolfgang, who'd been sitting on a bench dangling his legs with the rose in his hand, asked for permission to look at Monsieur LeBoeuf's books. There were only a few on the shelf, and Mademoiselle LeBoeuf assured me that there was nothing improper there for a child—some of them were religious tracts, others were notebooks from his old profession, and there was an illustrated version of Perrault's fairy tales.

"You can look at the fables, dearie," she told Wolfgang kindly, and in a moment our son was deep in the drawings of wolves and fairies.

Armed with her permission to interrogate the guests as I saw fit, I began with the two garrulous singers from our own country. As I mentioned, Frau Wentzl tries to look younger than her age. She uses a great deal of powder and black silk beauty spots on her face and neck, and wears English-style dresses rather long and skinny at the waist—the type I heard you say you like the least.

"Well!" She looked at me straight, upturning her nose. "That I should live to hear a Salzburger accuse me of murder!"

I assured her that such wasn't the case, and that I had nothing but admiration for her exquisite vibrato. May the Lord forgive me, that was quite an untruth, but she was captivated by it. Rather more sweetly she explained to me that Monsieur LeBoeuf had for a long time adored her from afar, and that this had elicited the envy of others. "Of course I was so much younger than he," she

added, "and so much better introduced, but he was a landed proprietor after all. I might have paid attention had he insisted a little more. Now, alas, it's too late. But at least *others* will not get him either."

This last statement immediately suggested that I should interrogate her traveling companion, Fraulein Putz. I did so only after ensuring that little Wolfgang was not troubling our hostess.

"Don't worry, Herr Mozart," her teary voice answered. "He's as good as an angel, looking at my poor brother's books."

Fraulein Putz spent most of the time of our conversation adjusting her red curlers under her muslin cap. I noticed that she too wore much face powder, and that one could see long scratches underneath it, as if she'd been in a catfight. I recalled what Made-moiselle LeBoeuf had said about their recent argument, and Frau Wentzl's spiteful words about rivals.

"I'm sure I don't know why you even bother to speak to me, Herr Mozart," she said. "It should be obvious to you that there's only one person among us who would have had an interest in killing Monsieur LeBoeuf."

"Really?" I asked. "Who could this person be?"

"Why, of course the Italian! Haven't you seen him play cards with the old man and beat him every time? I expect our host owed him a small fortune by last night. He probably refused to pay, and they got into a fight."

"If it's so, why wouldn't Signor Marini have escaped?"

Fraulein Putz laughed into her lacy handkerchief. "And go where? This is France, not Italy, and since none of us owns horses, he'd have had to awaken the stableboys or hitch a post himself."

She was right in that none of us could easily leave the Reine Margot. I was curious about the scratches but decided against asking about them just then. I briefly joined the servants in the upstairs bedroom where they'd laid Monsieur LeBoeuf on his bed. Monsieur Provins had sent for a priest and now sat at the foot of the bed with a contemplative look.

"Dear Herr Mozart," he told me, "sights like this only remind us of the fragility of human affairs."

I said that I agreed fully.

"You know," he continued, "I began my business career in this part of the country, and Monsieur LeBoeuf and I knew each other as children and young men. Well, who'd have said that I, the ragged boy who fetched wood in the forest, would end up a prosperous

lumber merchant, and the wealthy son of the publican would lie dead by a vagrant's knife?"

"A vagrant's knife?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

Monsieur Provins's jowly pink face opened in a sad smile.

"Why, I mean the most obvious solution for this unfortunate event, Herr Mozart. You can't have forgotten the beggar who came by before dinner and stood wailing at the doorstep."

"You're right!" I spoke up. "I *had* forgotten!"

"Well, you heard him weep his song and dance, and saw how LeBoeuf gave him a swift kick and tossed him across the road. The ladies felt full of pity, but our friend LeBoeuf knew better—he knew that one goes nowhere by being generous to the lazy poor. A stern businessman, that's what LeBoeuf was. Surely the beggar crawled back around the property, waited until the innkeeper went to water his roses, and took his vengeance then."

It made perfect sense, Anna Maria. How clearly did Monsieur Provins see what had happened! I went back downstairs and joined Mademoiselle LeBoeuf in the sitting room, where Wolfgang was looking at the dead man's gardening books.

"I believe that the beggar whom your brother turned back last night might be the culprit," I said. "Monsieur Provins thinks so, and he's likely right."

Mademoiselle LeBoeuf started weeping afresh. "I told my brother time and again that he ought to be more generous to the poor, but he was always hard-hearted in that way, both with unknown beggars and with his less fortunate friends. If what you and Monsieur Provins say is true, it'd have been so much better for my poor brother to give a sou to the beggar than to be stabbed for it."

More out of discomfort at hearing her weep than any desire to discontinue my interrogation, I left the sitting room.

Signor Marini was sitting at one of the tables in the dining room, playing at solitaire. Without lifting his dark curly head, he said, "So, Herr Mozart, have you found your murderer?"

I'd had little reason to speak to this unsavory gambler and was not disposed towards courtesy now. He'd tried to teach card tricks to Wolfgang the night before, and had only laughed when I'd taken the boy away from him. He was smiling even now, setting the greasy cards in orderly rows.

"Don't be so bigoted, Herr Mozart; have a seat. One can learn much from a card game if it's played well."

Against my better sense, I sat down facing him.

He had placed a group of face cards in line, one after the other. "The Queen of Hearts is Frau Wentzl," he said with a grin of his flashy white teeth. "She'd have liked to get the innkeeper's money, but I'm sure he said no. The Queen of Diamonds is Fraulein Putz, who fought with her girlfriend over the attentions of Monsieur LeBoeuf and lost. The Queen of Clubs is Mademoiselle LeBoeuf, who surely wanted to keep her bachelor brother from squandering money with either singer."

"Signor Marini," I interrupted. "You are a gossip and a vicious man, not above suspicion."

"Am I?" The gambler pointed at the next face card. "This is the King of—"

My dear wife, I lost my patience. I struck the cards with the flat of my hand and caused them to fly off the table. All fell except two, which Signor Marini deftly took in hand. "Very well," he smiled. "You don't want to hear the rest. But I'll keep one of these cards covered until you find your solution, and will show you the other to help you along the way."

It was the Joker.

"Whom does it represent?" I asked with contempt.

Signor Marini bowed from his waist, ceremoniously. "Your son Wolfgang."

Only the sudden arrival of the country priest accompanied by an acolyte kept me from striking the impudent Marini.

All of us except him and little Wolfgang joined in LeBoeuf's room to pray for his soul. Fraulein Putz dabbed her eyes with her lacy handkerchief, and Frau Wentzl blew her upturned nose; the servants snorted like sad dogs, and Mademoiselle LeBoeuf wept, leaning on Monsieur Provins's arm. At one point she became faint, and Provins kindly offered to fetch her some water.

I left the room afterwards, anxious that we should send someone after a possibly murderous beggar, and yet suspicious that Signor Marini might have used our time of prayer to escape if he was in fact the culprit.

It turned out that my suspicion was right. Marini was nowhere to be seen. I was about to go back upstairs and summon the foot-

men to chase him when Wolfgang skipped out of the sitting room with a book under his arm.

"Papa," he took me by the hem of my frock. "Papa, you must see this."

I hushed him, "Not now, Wolfgang," and tried to free myself.

"But you must look at it."

"There are more serious things at hand than a book, son. I'll look at it later."

"I tell you you must look." Undeterred, our son stood in front of me so that I couldn't go up the stairs. "I found the rose that Monsieur LeBoeuf was holding when he died."

To satisfy him, I glanced at the page that Wolfgang held out for me to see. It was a sketchbook which LeBoeuf had undoubtedly kept while gardening for the king in his younger years.

"This is the rose," young Wolfgang insisted.

It was a watercolor image of the dark pink, heavy-headed flower we'd found in the garden with the body. Below it, in ornate cursive, the name of the plant was written in Latin and French: *Rosa Gallica*, or *Rosier de Provins*.

Only now did I notice that Provins was also gone from the inn.

Well, Anna Maria! Five hours later, the merchant had been apprehended and had confessed his crime, and Signor Marini, who had led the gendarmes to him, was once more sitting in the dining room in front of his greasy cards.

Mademoiselle LeBoeuf sighed a deep sigh.

"Who would have thought that Monsieur Provins had kept a grudge for so many years? It's true he and my brother squabbled about a large piece of land and a mill, but was it reason enough to kill him?"

"I think that your brother's contempt for Provins when he was poor was rather at the root of the grudge," I said. "When the beggar was maltreated last night, Provins's resentment must have flared up again, and he decided to punish LeBoeuf."

"In Italy we kill for less," Marini added lightly.

"But how did you connect the rose with the killer?" Fraulein Putz asked, adjusting her red curlers.

"Ah, that was my son's doing," I was glad to reply.

Wolfgang was in bed by then, of course, because we have a long trip ahead of us in the morning, and two concerts at the archbishop's residence. "You see," I explained to the ladies, "right away

Wolfgang understood that the dying man hadn't just grasped a flower at random. LeBoeuf knew all the roses by name and staggered to the shrub that—by fatal coincidence—bore his killer's name. He hoped it would serve as a hint, but it was only because of my son's wit that we solved this crime. In his innocence, Wolfgang sought and found the perfect clue."

Signor Marini had been looking at me all this while, grinning.

"Do you disagree?" I asked.

"On the contrary, Herr Mozart, I concur entirely. I suspected the merchant from the moment LeBoeuf kicked the beggar; I saw murder in his eyes." He held up the card he had hidden from me, the Ace of Spades. "But I would never have thought about the rose, or the sketchbook. That was indeed your son's doing."

"Is that why you showed me the picture of the Joker in reference to Wolfgang?"

Marini laughed. "Oh no. That's because I heard your son play, and I think that he's the cleverest in the deck."

I believe he's right, dear Anna Maria.

Tomorrow we're headed for Paris, where God willing we'll be received at court. Take care of yourself and Nannerl, and do not worry about us. Be well, and receive the most affectionate embrace from your devoted husband,

Leopold Mozart

P.S. Wolfgang sends his love.

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Many a Pickle Makes a Mickie

DeLoris Stanton Forbes

When Uncle Willis died and left her all he had, she began to think that she didn't despise him after all.

Of course he didn't know she despised him, that seemed pretty obvious. Otherwise he would have willed his worldly goods to someone else. He'd have known for certain if he'd given her more cause, but a few close (very close) hugs and a touch (accidental?) every so often weren't enough to make her flat out tell him to knock it off. She knew he was getting his kicks all right, she knew that, she wasn't behind the door when they handed out smarts, but she was just a kid and she couldn't come out and nail him, so as soon as she was sure (and that took a couple of years, like her mother said, look before you cut off your nose), she did the next best thing, she stayed away from Uncle Willis. And she despised him because if he was into kiddie porn he didn't have the guts to make an honest (dishonest?) run at it. Even kids get totally turned off by gutless wonders. Maybe kids get turned off sooner. No rose-colored shades, at least none for her. Plus, if she said anything to her mother, her mother would have put it down to her "overactive imagination." What mothers didn't know didn't hurt them. Did it?

He wasn't really her uncle. He was either her grandmother's cousin's son or her step-grandmother's brother's nephew, something like that, but he was known as Uncle Willis by everyone in her family so that's what she called him, too. Her Great-aunt Louise once drew her a diagram of relationships, and she could reason it out to the extent that uncles and aunts had to be Mom or Dad's brothers or sisters while children of her parents' siblings were her cousins, but after that, when it got to second cousin once removed and all, she was completely out of it, and besides her folks were only children so it ended right there with her. Funny thing though, now she had relatives she'd never even heard of until Uncle Willis made her his heir. Then the distant, very distant (sixth or seventh

twice removed?) cousins began to come out of the woodwork and look sad-eyed at the coffin. All they got out of that was a wide-eyed stare and a weak handshake; if they expected anything else they had the wrong girl.

She and her mother had lived in Uncle Willis's house when she was young. Her father had vanished somewhere into the wild blue yonder (he'd been a pilot in the Air Force, quite dashing if you go by the old snapshots) before she was a year old, and Uncle Willis took pity on them, so her mother said, and gave them a roof over their heads, said that with moistened eyes and a dabbing of the nose with a Kleenex, she talked like that, very dramatic was her mother. They lived there until she was in her early teens. She never thought much about Uncle Willis until she got old enough to understand that sometimes things that look like they mean one thing really mean some other thing, and it was right about then that he turned generous and began doing nice things for her, that would be when she got to be ten or so.

Until then Uncle Willis was just part of the scenery like the picture of the Indian chief on horseback that hung in the hallway, he wasn't around all the time because he worked for the railroad and was in residence only on his week off, which came every five weeks or so. One time he came home with vacation plans in mind, would somebody like to take a trip to the seashore, he had an extra week coming and railroad passes, and her mother said, "Oh my, just imagine," and she poked her and she said, "Me? Do you mean me, Uncle Willis?" whereupon he said she could come along if she liked.

Oooh, said her mother. "Isn't that nice of Uncle Willis?" She poked her again. "Tell Uncle Willis thank you very much. Tell him you certainly would like to go."

Of course she liked, there was a big world out there and she hadn't seen any of it. The next year it was the mountains and after that a world's fair, wasn't it nice of Uncle Willis, her mother kept saying, but by age thirteen she was just a little more worldly (all that travel broadens one, they say, must be true), so she said yeah, sure, and after that she kept her distance. Her mother wondered why, but she never told her, merely said she preferred to stay home with her friends, and after awhile Uncle Willis stopped inviting and Mother stopped asking. Her mother was a very sweet, very simple person who eventually met a very sweet, very simple man and they got married and the three of them moved to a rental

duplex where they all lived fairly happily ever after.

In due time she all but forgot Uncle Willis. In due time he died and left everything he possessed to her. So what did she get for the hugs and the touches and the eventual rejection? She got the house she'd lived in as a child (much in need of repair by now, it seemed much smaller than she remembered, and the Indian picture had faded to yellows and blues), a bit of money (not a heck of a lot) in a savings account, and the Betamax.

The furnishings that came with the house were mostly familiar, the same sofa looking every year of its age, the same well-used beds and scratched tables and almost-springless chairs, but one modern touch was the video recorder and its television. She could imagine Uncle Willis sitting in front of the TV watching films, and she was briefly rather pleased for him because she had swallowed a little guilt pill when she saw how drab his life had been, visualized his loneliness. When it came to loneliness, she knew the way, and she was not strictly from the freezer.

She'd sell the house, she decided; for whatever she could get and give the furniture to the Salvation Army but keep the money and the VCR. It wasn't until she turned it on that she realized it was a Betamax, and she thought, boy, that was just like Uncle Willis to leave her a video recorder that was passé, they didn't make Beta tapes any more, Beta bet on the wrong system and lost so she was stuck with a VCR that she couldn't use. Par for the course for Didi Becker.

Except that she found tapes. Dozens of tapes in dusty sleeves, reprints of old movies starring John Wayne and Gary Cooper and Clark Gable and Bette Davis and Cary Grant and Deanna Durbin (who the heck was Deanna Durbin?), tapes of Spencer Tracy and Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, Barbara Stanwyck, and even Shirley Temple when she was young (that figured since he went in for little girls) and, like they used to say, a cast of thousands, people she knew and people she'd never heard of. It seemed that Uncle Willis was a cinema buff, a collector; and maybe these were valuable, if not now, later, so she took them all home. Including some blank Beta tapes for future recording. If she couldn't buy Beta tapes, she could at least make her own. Start her own collection? Stephen King movies? Hmmm?

She set up the Beta, turned her set and the machine on, stuck a tape into its tape slit.

The usual rental tape begins with a warning about counterfeiting, and her blank tapes began with a message, too, but instead of a warning they contained taping instructions thusly:

This cassette contains an experimental tape; do not use in conjunction with regular television programming.

(Great. Not even the blank tapes were usable.)

To activate, insert cassette and press BX REC MODE.

(Bx? Yes, there was a BII and a BIII and a BX. She pushed the latter.)

Give vocal command.

(Give vocal command? What vocal command? These instructions were even more confusing than the usual VCR instructions. Didn't any of the people who wrote these things speak basic English?)

Be sure to indicate TIME as well as PLACE.

Time? Place? Feeling foolish she said, "Yesterday. One P.M. Uncle Willis's house." Expecting nothing, she activated PLAY.

A picture came on her television screen. The camera was focused on the exterior of Uncle Willis's house; someone was coming up the walk. The someone was she. She saw herself open the door and go in, she saw herself walk through the rooms, end up with the Beta and the TV, pick up the tapes... she pushed the STOP button, thought a moment, rewound.

She said, "Uncle Willis's house, July 4, 1963," a date chosen completely at random. She pressed PLAY.

It was a hot day, there were high, thin clouds way up in the yellow-white sky. There was a long-legged girl-child wearing a short dress printed all over with strawberries, she was barefooted and she carried a brown paper sack. In the sack were firecrackers called ladyfingers because they were so small and two boxes of sparklers. She went into the house through the back door, into the kitchen. The kitchen was furnished with a refrigerator with a round white dome, a lineoleum-topped wooden table with chairs, and a stove held up by white legs more shapely than the girl's at each of its corners. On top of the stove was a big box of matches. The girl stood on tiptoe, added the box to the collection in her sack.

A voice from another room called, "Is that you, Didi?"

"Yes, Mother."

"I'm going upstairs to clean the bathroom. After that we'll have lunch."

"Yes, ma'am."

"So don't go away."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I won't be long."

"No, ma'am."

"What?"

"I said I'll just be out in the back yard."

"All right. But don't go away. I've got a surprise for you."

The girl hesitated, heard footsteps on the stairs, shook her head, and went outside. When she figured she was out of earshot, she took out a pack of the ladyfinger firecrackers; they were all strung together like tiny frankfurters. She held the package in her hand, had to put it down to get a match from the box, picked it up again, and struck the match on the box side. Bobby Griffin said only sissies shot off ladyfingers one at a time. The thing to do, he said, was let the whole pack go off in your hand. That proved you were no baby, that proved you knew the score.

She touched the lighted match to the mud-colored string that held the crackers together, smelled the char, saw the flame run, heard the sound, felt the explosion, and screamed.

From an upstairs window her mother called out. "Didi! Didi! What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Mother. Nothing's wrong."

"Somebody's shooting off firecrackers."

"Yes, Mother. It's the Fourth of July." Her mother was a good mother. But dumb.

"You're not shooting off firecrackers, are you, Didi?"

"No, Mother. I have sparklers."

"Well . . . don't light them yet. I'll be down in just a little bit."

"Yes, Mother. I'll wait."

When she'd left the window, the girl went into the house and slathered butter on her palm, thought she'd pay Bobby Griffin back but good when she ran into him tomorrow. Only sissies, huh? She'd show him sissies.

"That you in the kitchen, Didi?"

"Yes, Uncle Willis. I didn't know you were here. When did you get home?"

"Oh, a little while ago." He came into the room, a slight man of medium height with thinning reddish hair. His skin was very dark from the sun, and his eyes were small and very pale behind his glasses. Watching him on the Betamax, she realized she'd forgotten what he looked like. She'd forgotten this entire day, it seemed. (Or had she?) All she vaguely recalled was the firecrackers. She sat

back. It was like watching a TV film with a familiar cast of characters, but somehow it made her nervous. Somebody strange was writing the script, that was it, maybe Steven Spielberg?, and she had this strange feeling that something . . . bad? . . . was about to happen.

"Oh, Willis. There you are." Mother came into the kitchen, too, her eyes were bright, over-bright, Didi thought, had she been crying? Mother crying? What had she got to be crying about? Maybe she'd gotten soap in her eyes while cleaning the bathroom—and what was wrong, not quite right, with her dress? It was hanging funny, it was buttoned wrong . . .

Uncle Willis went to her, put his hand on her shoulder. "Your mother wants to tell you something," he said, smiling. He had one gold-filled tooth. Right in the middle.

Suddenly Didi's hand stopped hurting, some other pain took its place, a pain near her heart. Maybe because her heart stopped beating? Like a clock that's stopped ticking? Sudden silence?

"Uncle Willis has asked me to marry him," said Mother. He kissed her hair. She stared at Didi, eyes pleading, eyes—frightened? Mother frightened? Of what? What did Mother have to be frightened about?

"No," she shouted aloud at the television. "No, no! Never! Never, never, never! Ever! I'll kill myself first!" She put the Betamax on PAUSE and they were frozen there, the three of them. Uncle Willis—was that a sneer of self-satisfaction on his face? Mother—some kind of fear? Yes, absolutely. Some kind of fear. And she . . . she'd never known she could look like that. Maybe now. When she knew how to keep score. But then?

Memory was returning. Full force.

Didi hadn't screamed at Uncle Willis. Didi hadn't said, "No, no! Never!," or any of the rest of it, Didi'd smiled. She could remember how hard it had been to smile. She punched PLAY, and the scene went on.

Didi went up to Uncle Willis and hugged him hard. She was tall for her age (how old had she been—ten? eleven?). She was almost as tall as he was, and in the hugging she managed to smear some of the butter across the back of his coat. Didi looked into his eyes and smiled some more. His sneer faded, was replaced by an expression that she now recognized as doubt followed by confusion, but then she'd told herself, I'll play-act for you, Uncle Willis, but you'll marry my mother over my dead body.

After that when he'd come home she'd go up to his room after supper while Mother was doing dishes and maybe mixing up a batch of bread dough (she made great homemade bread from scratch, her mother was a fabulous cook), and they'd have "evening chats." "You tell me about what you do during the day, and I'll tell you what I do, Uncle Willis. I just go to school, that's all, but what do you do when you're away with the railroad? I just love railroads, Uncle Willis. I'd love to take a long trainride someday. Trains are so romantic. Don't you think trains are romantic? Not like airplanes. Everybody rides on airplanes, but riding on a train is different, don't you think? You get to see a new part of the country." And she'd smile at him and lean her chin on her hand and listen to whatever he chose to tell her.

At first he seemed a little uncomfortable, but after a few nights he began to tell her a lot. About how his mother died when he was a baby and how he was raised by his father and two uncles and how he never graduated from high school but had worked from the time he was fourteen, worked always on the railroad working his way up on the maintenance crews until now he was foreman and had privileges and would one day be able to retire with a pension, he was, he told her, a self-made man of substance. To which she'd replied (spoken with wide eyes), "Isn't that something! Isn't that really something!" Not much in the way of brilliant repartee, but then she was only eleven. Or was it ten?

It was good enough for Uncle Willis. He ate it up, and it wasn't long before she'd get a hug when she said goodnight and the trip invitations began. At first she'd asked, "Mother, why don't you go with Uncle Willis, wouldn't you like to see Pike's Peak?" and Mother had shaken her head and answered, "Then who would take care of you while I was off gallivanting? No, you go, honey. You can tell me all about it. It will be much better that way."

And then she thought, Mother doesn't want to be alone with him, that's what it means. Refusing to go away with him meant Didi was right, she didn't want to marry him, not at all. She must have agreed to marry for some other reason because it was plain to Didi that she didn't love him. She must have said yes to keep a roof over their heads, that was it. She must have said she'd marry him for Didi!

She couldn't honestly say that when she started buttering Uncle Willis up (both literally and figuratively) she knew what would come of it. She wasn't a born Lolita, not at all (in fact in later years

she won the title Miss Frigidity). But she had this feeling that being nice to Uncle Willis would better achieve her goal than kicking and screaming and holding her breath until she turned blue, her goal, of course, being the separation of state (Willis) and church (Mother). She didn't know then and she didn't know now what had passed between them, why they had called the whole thing off (she supposed she could find out on her magical Betamax if she knew just when it happened, but she didn't know and she really wasn't interested in details—God forbid—only in results). She guessed it could be said that she stole Mother's fiancé. So be it.

By the end of the third summer (she was entering high school by then and beginning to have a life) she'd had quite enough of Uncle Willis, but then she worried that things might return to status quo. What to do, what to do? A permanent solution? Under no circumstances, no matter what the cost, Uncle Willis and Mother . . . she picked a date, she might be off a day or two, a week or two even, but somewhere around "September 1, 1967, Uncle Willis's house" and hit the PLAY button.

It was early morning, a hot and muggy early morning made even hotter in the kitchen by the big kettle on the stove that Mother was tending. She was pickling, an annual ritual. Mother made delicious pickles, she made bread-and-butter pickles and she made watermelon rind pickles and she made dill pickles and sweet chunk pickles and today she was making End-of-the-Garden pickles, God, could that woman make pickles, bless her simple heart!

For Uncle Willis she always made a few jars of dill pickles kosher, he'd picked up a taste for kosher pickles on his travels and though Mother and Didi thought them too highly spiced, he loved them, so she always made a batch just for him. She saw them now, a dozen of them cooling in their Ball jars ready for their permanent seal. Uncle Willis's pickles. A dozen of same. On the assumption that he went through one jar a month. Sometimes he did, sometimes he didn't. It depended. But sooner or later in the course of a year he ate twelve jars of Mother's dill pickles kosher, she couldn't ever recall one jar too many nor one too few. He started with twelve jars in his little cubbyhole in the cellar, when pickling time came again it was like the ten little Indians, and then there were none.

Pickles. Row after row of the finished product sat on the kitchen counter, all the varieties encased in clean and sparkling glass looking like blue ribbon samples in a magazine picture. "Whew," said Mother, wiping her brow with the hem of her apron. "This is the

end of it, thank God. I don't know why I keep on pickling, Didi, store-bought pickles don't cost that much."

"But they don't taste like yours do, Mother." Fourteen-year-old DiDi (do note the new spelling, she'd changed it from just plain Didi on departing the ninth grade, nobody at the high school would question that spelling of her name, and she'd be a new and infinitely more interesting person with two capital *D*'s) was mesmerized by the pickles, such an array.

"Let me finish this last batch, will you, Mother? I need to learn how. You learn by doing, that's what my teacher said. May I, Mother, may I, please?"

"Well . . ." She fanned her flushed face with the flap end of the apron. "I really could stand a shower, a nice cool shower . . ."

"All I do is take the jars out of their bath with this thing . . ." she waved the tongs her mother used, "and let them cool. I'm capable of that, don't you think?"

Mother smiled and said, "Leave them in just ten minutes longer, Didi" (she still used the old spelling, dear stick-in-the-mud Mother). "I'll tighten the seals when they've cooled."

DiDi smiled back. "Ten more minutes. Easy as pie. Take your time in the shower, Mother. Better yet, have a relaxing bath. See you later, alligator."

She chuckled. "See you later, alligator. You kids." And she left.

And DiDi trotted out to the barn where such things as the lawn mower, rakes and hoes, her outgrown bicycle, old cans of paint, fertilizer for Mother's roses, et cetera, were stored and found what she'd thought she'd find, the remains of a tin of rat poison Mother'd used last year to rid the tomato patch of varmints.

Back in the kitchen DiDi gingerly lifted the flat metal lid atop one of the jars of Uncle Willis's pickles. Her heart was beating so loudly she could hear it thumping in her head, the here-and-now Didi thought she could hear the then DiDi's heart through the television. The pickles smelled spicy, the pickles looked perfect; even after she sifted rat poison into the jar, they looked good, since the fine powder sank to the bottom, disintegrated, disappeared.

Was it enough? Should she do another jar? As she debated (Did she really want to do this, any of it? It wouldn't kill him, would it? Just a little rat poison? Make him sick, that's all it would do. Make him seriously ill and he'd have to go to the hospital and . . . no, that wouldn't help. Mother'd just nurse him back to health, DiDi knew how she was, she was Florence Nightingale reincarnated

when it came to ailments. DiDi'd just have to go ahead and . . .), the screen door banged, someone was coming. Watching the scene unfold, she could swear she heard music, ominous music, Alfred Hitchcock music rising up and over like in *Psycho* when danger is on its way . . .

DiDi moved quickly, doused the pickle jar with powder once more and thrust the rat poison tin into a jeans pocket, replaced the lid, and picked up the tongs. Judging from her armchair she rated young DiDi's hand and eye coordination A-one.

Uncle Willis came into the kitchen. "Lucille . . . oh, it's you, Didi. I thought it was your mother. Making pickles, I see. You're being mother's little helper. That's nice."

Didi smiled, nodded, "Yours are over there."

"So they are. And just in time. I'm on my last jar."

Mother's voice came down the stairs, "Didi, are you taking the pickles out of their bath? The ten minutes are up."

"Yes, ma'am. Excuse me, Uncle Willis. You might get burned if you come too close. And we wouldn't want to get burned, would we, Uncle Willis?" What an innocent face, what a sweet innocent face, no wonder he'd willed Didi (small *d*) his belongings, suspecting that child of ill will was unthinkable. Such a sweet girl. Such a sweet pretty girl. Should have the world at her feet. Should have.

She remembered the months that followed. Great gobs of guilt followed. In her bed at night she thought of ways to undo what she'd done. What she'd done was terrible. Horrible. Unthinkable.

So why was she thinking of it? Why had she chosen that (random?) date . . . with a sudden movement, she hit the STOP, hit the POWER, turned it off. All this nostalgia stuff, sure, she could relive joyful days . . . if she could remember when they were, there must have been some, there must have been many . . . Relive . . . how about anticipate? Could her Beta foretell the future? Aha, that was the question—the lottery number was drawn on Saturday nights. If, say, she had the number in advance . . . why not? If she could see next Sunday's newspaper . . . on Sunday mornings she always read the newspaper from cover to cover, and on page two the lottery numbers were listed . . . yeah, hey, that was the deal!

She found a pen and pad, calculated, and gave Beta the Sunday-coming date. "Turn it on first, you dope," she said aloud, then followed suit. Date repeated, she sat back to watch.

The TV screen said NO FILE FOUND.

She said aloud, "What do you mean, no file found?"

The screen blinked. NO FILE FOUND.

She tried again, something easier, tomorrow's date. Again the message came, NO FILE FOUND.

Great. No future from Beta. Only the past.

The G-d past.

You can't run away from the past, Didi, she could hear her mother saying that. Her mother had a litany of trite sayings, tried and true was among them. Certain beliefs were "tried and true." Such as, "What goes around comes around." She'd asked her once, "What the heck does that mean?"

"You'll find out," she'd said. "One day you'll find out."

Mornings when Uncle Willis was in residence he'd come down for breakfast and watch Mother, watch DiDi with his little beady eyes, and she'd reconsider anew. He deserved a poisoned pickle, the dirty old man . . . no, no, he doesn't, no one deserves that. But how to undo what she'd done? By ruining all the pickles, how could she explain that, the jars had leaked? Mother had closed the jars herself, checked them thoroughly. The best plan, destroy the offending jar was the best plan, but which was the one? She should have marked it somehow, that's what she should have done, but she hadn't and now when she sneaked down to his cubbyhole (Uncle Willis's pickles were kept in that special place, dark and cool, a little cave behind the chimney in the basement because it was thought that things kept longer and better there) and looked at the jars—how many, eleven, now ten, then nine, eight—he was working on jar number four, was it the one? He seemed all right—yet was number four, his current jar, the one? No signs yet of any illness, but would he suddenly gasp for breath, clutch his throat, keel over right then and there and die?

"Didi, are you feeling all right? You look so funny . . ."

"No, I'm fine, Mother. Just fine. How are you, Uncle Willis? Are you fine, too?"

"Yes, Didi. I'm fine." And so he was.

So—which of the remaining eight? They all looked alike. She took them out and even shook them, could see no sediment that looked unnatural. How about if she carried all of them away somehow (in what to where?) and claimed that they'd been stolen? Come now, DiDi, be sensible. Undecided, she pondered and puzzled and watched, half-hoping (damn you, Uncle Willis) and half-fearful (damn you, dreadful DiDi).

It was during the eighth jar that it happened. (Total agony as he chewed his way through the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh), the dinner table was the scene, but what was the date? Think hard, think hard, it was in autumn, after Halloween, she thought, how about November . . . sometime in early November, she called out a date, and a scene came to life.

Mother looked nervous, DiDi thought. Strange, Mother was always so calm. Partly because Mother wasn't prone to wild imaginings as DiDi was but also because she was a naturally accept-things-as-they-are person. What did she have to be nervous about?

"I have an announcement to make, Willis," she said suddenly, causing Uncle Willis to pause forkful in mid-air to say, "Yeah?"

"Didi, I should have told you first, but to tell the truth it's all seemed so unreal, I couldn't believe it myself. I'm going to get married. On Monday. To Ronald Brent. You know, Didi, that nice man at the supermarket. The one in charge of the fruits and vegetables. With the dark hair. You know the one."

"Is that so." Uncle Willis put his forkful of gravied potato in his mouth and chewed.

"The fat one?" DiDi asked. "That's getting bald?"

Mother looked hurt, and DiDi apologized. "I'm sorry, he's just a little—plump, Mom. And just a little bald. Actually he's very nice looking. When did you two—become friends?"

Mother blushed. "Oh, it's been a long time coming. He always had a kind word when I came marketing, and he'd save some extra nice tomatoes when my plants had stopped producing, and then he began to walk along with me and we'd talk a little, you know, just pleasant conversation and I found that he's never married because he took care of his mother, who recently passed away, poor thing, she had cancer, it was a slow and painful death and I felt so sorry for Ronald. He looked drawn and thin, yes, he did, Didi, too thin, so I made a casserole for him and, well, one thing led to another and he'd take me out for a soda or an ice cream on his break and . . ." She smiled, and she looked suddenly as young as one of DiDi's friends. "Yesterday he proposed, and today . . ." she held out her hand, "he gave me a ring."

"Congratulations," said Uncle Willis, cutting into his chicken-fried steak.

"But I thought . . ." DiDi stopped, bit her lip.

"Oh." Mother blushed again. "You mean—Willis and I . . ." Suddenly flashing fire, she looked at Uncle Willis. "I guess you could

say your Uncle Willis changed his preference."

"Your mother and I called the other thing off awhile back," said Uncle Willis between bites. "Figured it might not work out. Pass me the peas, will you, Didi?"

Oh my God, thought DiDi. Oh my God. It worked. I really did come between them. But surely he didn't think, he couldn't think . . . "Where will we live, Mother? Here?"

"Oh no. Ronald has a very nice little house. Over on Market Street. You'll like it, I'm sure."

Watching Uncle Willis, DiDi said, "If you say so." He didn't even look up, sopped a piece of bread into his gravy.

On the day they moved away . . . that date she thought she did remember, well, maybe not exactly, but near enough . . . if she told the Betamax what to do, would it do it? Would it show DiDi stealing down to the basement, picking up the hammer that was kept on a bench, smashing Uncle Willis's pickles, watching the pickles flop like dead fish onto the dirt floor, watching the juice soak into the soil?

She closed her eyes and saw without benefit of telecommunications. "Didi? Are you ready? Where are you, Didi?" Mother's voice from upstairs.

A swift ascent of the steps. "Here, Mother. I'm ready. I'm ready now."

At the front door Mother looking backward, "It's been a haven," saying to Ronald, "I do feel bad about Willis. No one to look after him now. I do hope he'll be all right."

"He'll be all right, Mother," DiDi, coming between them, had assured her. "Don't worry, he'll be all right."

And he had been. Obviously. For years. Until his recent demise. What had Uncle Willis died of, anyway? Old age? He couldn't have been *that* old. Cancer? Stroke? Heart attack? She realized she didn't know the cause of her benefactor's death. Natural causes, she supposed that's what it came down to. Natural causes.

But not from poisoned pickles. Whatever the cause, not that.

For God's sake, that was years ago. If her doctored pickles had caused trouble, that would have happened ages ago . . .

What day had Uncle Willis died anyway? She had the obituary in her bag, she took it out and read the date, relayed it to Beta, and there she was, looking in on Uncle Willis's last day of life on earth.

He looked much the same, sparser of hair and thinner, maybe the lenses in the glasses were thicker but actually much the same. He was in the kitchen, he had one of those plastic and foil packets of lunchmeat and a loaf of bread on the counter, he was making a sandwich. Not much of a sandwich. Just luncheon meat and bread. Plop on a plate. Biting into it standing up. Frowning. She didn't blame him. Sighing. Recalling Mother's cooking? Yes, in a way, he said it out loud, "I'd give a lot for one of your pickles, Lucille."

Another dry bite of sandwich. "Guess they're all gone."

He chewed, swallowed, picked at his teeth. False teeth. Ugh.

"It was quite a while back," said Uncle Willis. "Not much chance that there might be just one jar still hanging around . . ."

Of course not, she assured the Betamax. She smashed them all. Ages ago.

What was Uncle Willis doing?

He was heading for the basement. Are you senile, Uncle Willis? she asked him. There's nothing down there but spiders and dust and old junk long forgotten . . .

He made his way down the stairs, blinked in the semigloom. There were shelves holding old tins and empty jars and wadded up cloths, there was the cubbyhole behind the chimney, yes, he was heading for it, the man had lost it, obviously the man had lost it, looking for pickles almost thirty years later. . . .

He bent over, reached in, and found nothing, she could tell by the look of disappointment, he reached in farther, as far as his arm could go and . . . brought out a filthy container of something, he rubbed at it like Aladdin's lamp and uncovered glass, he cradled it in his arm and struggled back up the steps as fast as he could go, in the kitchen he rubbed at it with a dishrag until there it was for Uncle Willis and Betamax and Didi (back to the small *d* again) to see . . .

She blinked her eyes, shook her head, stopped, rewound, began again. There was Uncle Willis and the sandwich just as before, but that was all. No pickles. Just Uncle Willis eating his sandwich, rinsing off the plate, wiping it and putting it away (he had always been neat), going up to his room for his afternoon nap, going to sleep, a restless sleep, tossing, turning, making sounds, gurgles and choking noises and at last the death rattle . . . Uncle Willis had died in his sleep! That's all. Just as she'd thought. Natural causes. She'd imagined the pickles. She'd dreamed the pickles. (Just as she'd imagined the smashing of the pickles? Why don't

you bring that day back, Didi? The day of departure. Did you really go down and smash the jars of pickles, did you really? Why don't you look and see?)

"Didi has a very vivid imagination," her mother was fond of saying. "She's going to do something very artistic when she grows up because she has this wonderful imagination. Not like me, not at all like me. If I can't see it, I can't picture it but Didi can."

Yeah. Right. Something artistic. Like selling undergarments in the local Penney's. As for imagination, people who see pickles that aren't there are in serious trouble, she had to be sure and she was afraid to run the tape again because this time maybe the pickles would be there. What she needed to know was—why had Uncle Willis died?

Who could tell her? The doctor who'd signed his death certificate had the answer, there had to be a doctor, that was the law, but who was he and whom could she ask?

Ask? No one. It would seem very strange if she went around asking what killed Uncle Willis. "Beta, do your thing," she commanded and began the tape on the day after Uncle Willis died.

It was evening, and there was someone standing on Uncle Willis's porch as the police cruiser drove up. The someone was a woman, a woman with a child, the child was whining and pulling at his mother, his mother was saying, "Shut up, Gordon." She had no idea who they were.

Two uniformed policemen got out of the car and went up to the porch. "I rang the doorbell, and I knocked, and I looked in the windows," the woman told them. "He's pretty old, you know, and I think something must be wrong."

"Mama," wailed Gordon.

"Shut up," she said without emotion.

"You live next door?" one of the policemen asked.

"Yeah. Over there. I come in a couple of days a week and vacuum and clean, this is payday, he always pays me on Fridays, but he don't answer. I just know there's something wrong."

The cop banged again on the door. The other cop peered in the window. "Why can't you just bust the door in?" asked the woman.

"Can't do that without cause," said the cop. "Private property."

"I'll have a look-see around back," the second one announced.

"I should think you would just bust the door in," said the woman. "I know something's wrong."

"Hey, Smitty," his partner called from the rear of the building.

Smitty clomped down the steps and disappeared around the corner of the house.

"Mama," wailed the child.

"Shut up," his mother commanded. Muttering ("Seems to me he could just bust the door in"), she pushed at the front door, twisted the knob, and the panel swung open. "Hey," she called. "Hey!" She went into the house, and Beta went with her.

She passed through the rooms calling his name, the child trailing after her. In the kitchen she saw the policemen peering in through the window, went to the back door, and let them in. "The front door was open," she told them. "You should have busted in."

"Lady," began the cop called Smitty. The other one shushed him. "No sign of him, huh?"

"He's here somewhere," the woman said. "I know he is. I think he's dead. I'll bet you—and I'll never get my money. Gordon, shut up, will you. We'll go home when I'm ready."

They found him upstairs in his bed, all curled up in a ball. "What do you figure?" Smitty asked his partner.

"How should I know? Heart attack? You never can tell with these old guys. The doc will know. Guess we'd better call him."

"You can go along now," Smitty told the woman. "You were right. Something was wrong."

"I told you," she said. "But what about my money?"

His partner bristled, said, "Lady . . ."

"Come on, Gordon." She jerked at the child's arm. "We've been gypped again. Twenty bucks I'm out. Twenty bucks down the drain. Every time something starts looking good, it turns to . . ." and her voice faded as she disappeared down the stairs.

"Come on, Beta," Didi exhorted, "get on with it. Bring on the doctor."

When he came, he was brisk and brusque. "Can't tell much, but I'll put down coronary. That's what got him, that's what gets us all one way or another. The old ticker stops. Okay, you can haul him off. I'll do an autopsy sometime tomorrow. When I get to it. He's number three or four, I figure. Any of you guys got a match? I know I ought to cut out smoking but . . ."

She turned off the Beta.

Turned it back on and started it up again; Beta, please take me to the morgue, take me to Uncle Willis . . . she had to shut her eyes, she couldn't bear to watch. But she could hear. "Uhhh, pretty well preserved considering . . . uhhh, something here in the vascocon-

stricter sector, can't tell for sure without testing . . . what did you say, Ernie? Well, could be. High blood pressure, no doubt . . . these oldtimers never had much medical attention, you know, thought doctor was a dirty word and say hospital to 'em and they run like the devil was on their tail. . . . Well, if you agree, I'm going to let it lie. Coronary, period. Okay? Okay. Next."

Exhausted, she turned off the Beta and went to bed. Somewhere in the middle of the night she awakened, she'd heard noises? In the kitchen? She listened to silence. Dreaming. Just dreaming. Stop, brain. Go to sleep. Let it lie.

Many a pickle makes a mickle. A stray rhyme from some dark place. Whatever it meant. Pickles and mickles, pickles and mickles, Uncle Willis tickles, Uncle Willis tickles pickles, Uncle Willis had me in a tight embrace . . .

In the morning she went back to Uncle Willis's house, let herself in. The stair to the cellar was steep and straight down into muggy darkness, the air below smelled of mold and long-dead things. She clicked the light switch but nothing happened, the electricity had been shut off, of course. Who wants electricity in the house of a dead man?

In her handbag she carried a tiny flashlight attached to a police whistle, a whistle for use if accosted by muggers and or rapists, that was the kind of world her mother could never have managed so just as well that she'd died in childbirth in her forty-second year. (Mother, how could you, how could you have wanted a child at your age? Wasn't I enough? Wasn't I good enough?) She shone the pinpoint of light on the steps and on what lay at the bottom of them.

Just as well, she thought, that she couldn't see what lay in the shadows. ("Didi, you do have such an overactive imagination! I don't know where you get it from. Must be from your father. That's all he did leave, bills and a baby with a wild imagination. There are no vampires in your closet, there are no monsters under your bed, there never were and there never will be. Now, go to sleep like a good girl, and maybe Uncle Willis will bring you something nice when he gets back from the railroad.")

She found the chimney, she found the cubbyhole. Her light wasn't bright enough, she had to put her hand in, she had to reach through the muck and the cobwebs, was that something crawling up her arm? Was that something soft and sticky and palpitating just beyond her fingers?

What she found was nothing. She took a minute to breathe deeply, then she hurried up and out.

Sitting on the countertop was a jar of pickles. Kosher dill pickles. She panicked and ran, through the little back porch, down the steps past the garbage pail (knocked that over), ran through wet sheets on the clothesline of the next yard before she stopped.

A small boy with thumb in mouth was barring her way.

A woman, a familiar woman, came out of the back of the house yelling, "Hey, what are you doing to my laundry, what are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "Here, Gordon." From the wallet in her bag she produced a bill. "Here's the twenty dollars. My uncle owed your mother."

The child clutched the money in grubby little fingers, the woman said, "Your uncle . . . ?," and she fled. Back to Uncle Willis's house. Back, picking up the garbage pail (empty, of course), onto the little porch (hooking the screen after her), into the house.

There were no pickles on the kitchen counter. No pickles at all. For the time being.

Thanks, Uncle Willis, she said aloud. Thanks a lot. And she blew her police whistle shrill and loud for ever so long a time, and as she blew, she thought, when I get home I'll run the Beta again, I'll look at the day we left, I'll make certain about the hammer and the pickles, that's what I'll do and I'll see for myself and that will be that but the trouble is . . . the trouble is . . . I can't remember the day . . . *tweet, tweet, shriek* . . .

Too Dumb to Steal

Dan Sontup

Ed called me a little after nine thirty. It was Saturday night, and old Mr. Johnson had closed up at nine o'clock like he always did every night except Sunday and that was because the station wasn't open on Sunday. A while back, I had sort of hinted that I wouldn't mind pumping gas on a Sunday since I didn't go anywhere anyhow, not to church like Mr. Johnson or any other place in town. But he just grunted and said there would be no work done at his station on the Sabbath, but I knew the real reason probably was because he didn't want me handling any money when he wasn't around to keep an eye on me.

I was lying on my bed in my room at the back of the garage, listening to country music on the radio and trying to figure where I could get some money to get my old TV fixed. I like TV, but I like country music, too, so I didn't miss the TV too much, except maybe the Westerns with the cowboys and that other show where the girls all

run around on the beach in little bathing suits.

The pay phone on the wall out in the garage rang and kept on ringing, and I finally got up and went out there and picked up the phone and said, "Hullo, Johnson's Garage, Donald speaking," just like Mr. Johnson had made me practice saying until I got it right so it would be okay for me to answer the phone if he was busy.

I heard some sounds, people talking and other noises, but nobody said anything into the phone. Then there was a shout in my ear: "Hiya, Donny!"

I didn't have to hear him say any more than that, and I knew it was Ed. It wasn't just that he was the only one who ever called me Donny—everybody else calls me plain old Don or sometimes Donald—but you could never forget a voice like Ed's. It sounded like a man snoring while he was still wide awake. Ed snored loud when he was asleep, too. I spent every night for eight years listening to him snoring away in the bottom bunk of our cell.

"You got out, Ed?" I said.



IT TOOK A LONG WHILE BEFORE HE SHOWED UP.

His laugh almost busted my eardrum. "You still know how to ask dumb questions, Donny. Of course I'm out! You think maybe I had my secretary place a long-distance call from the joint?" He laughed again at his own joke. Ed did things like that a lot of the time.

I had to ask him. "You bust out, Ed?"

"Dumb question number two. What'd I tell you last year when you got out?" He didn't wait for me to answer. "I told you I was gonna play it smart and work on my parole. You remember that, don't you, Donny?"

"Yeah, I remember."

"Piece of cake, that's what it was. Talked real humble and sincere to those upstate hicks on the board, and they fell for it, 'specially since one of my buddies on the outside wrote them he had a job waiting for me." He laughed a lot louder this time.

"I'm glad for you, Ed."

"Sure, sure. Look, kid, I just got into town. Let's get together. Got something important we gotta talk about."

"Well, I don't go out much, Ed, and—"

"You trying to tell me you don't want me around?"

His voice was hard. I'd heard him use that hard voice before, and I was glad each time that

it wasn't me he was talking to then.

"No, Ed, 'course not. It's just I usually just lay around here on the weekend when the garage is closed, sort of resting up for work on Monday and, well, what I mean is my boss keeps me hopping all week and I get pretty tired out and I—"

It was like he wasn't even hearing me, just like sometimes back there in the cell. "I'm in the bus depot," he said. "Come on down and get me."

"I got no car, Ed."

"You work in a garage, don't you?"

"Sure, Ed, but we're closed for the night and—"

"They got cars there, don't they? I mean, cars that people leave to be fixed overnight, and maybe a tow truck, right?"

"Mr. Johnson takes the tow truck home with him, but yeah, there's a couple of cars here now."

"Ready to roll?"

"Yeah, I think so, but—"

"So borrow one for a while, dummy!"

"I—I can't do that."

"Why not?" He had that hard voice again.

"The keys are locked up in a desk drawer in the office, and the office is locked, too."

The phone was real quiet for a long while.

"I'm sorry, Ed," I mumbled.

Finally he said, "How far are you from the bus station?"

"About three miles."

The phone went quiet again. Then he said, "I'll see if I can hitch a ride. If I can't, I'll walk it. Which way do I go?"

"Turn left outside the bus station. That's Main Street heading south. Stay on it. The garage is on the right just after you pass a diner and a movie house."

"Look for me." He hung up the phone.

I went back to my room and looked out the back window at the parking lot behind the garage. Charlie Fenway's old Chevy was there, and a new, fancy looking road van, the kind with little curtains on the windows and the ladder on the back. The van belonged to Mr. Spaulding, the real estate man in town. I didn't like him much. He always looked at me like I wasn't there.

Charlie Fenway was different. He always had a smile and a joke for me, like I was an old friend of his, which I really wasn't but he made me feel that way anyhow. He and his wife had dropped off the Chevy for a brake job around five o'clock so she could drive him in her car to his night shift at the bridge.

Timmy, the mechanic, had gone right to work on the

Chevy for Charlie 'cause he promised Charlie he could come and pick it up first thing Monday morning even though it would be ready before then, but Mr. Johnson wouldn't open the station for anyone on Sunday. He was real strict about not working on the Lord's day of rest, he always told us, but like I said, he probably wouldn't have minded one little bit if he thought he could trust me and I pumped enough gas to bring in some money for him, even if it was on the Sabbath.

Timmy let me help him with the Chevy brake job. He was teaching me how to be a mechanic. Both of us knew Mr. Johnson wouldn't ever hire me for that, but Timmy gave me lots of pointers anyhow. He told me I didn't have to pump gas and sweep out garages all my life.

But Timmy didn't let me help with Mr. Spaulding's road van. He said Mr. Spaulding would have a fit if something went wrong and he knew I'd touched his fancy van. So Timmy did it all by himself. The job was just putting in some kind of liquor cabinet in the back of the van that Mr. Spaulding said he had to have done right away 'cause he was taking out some important clients on Monday. Timmy could have done the job right then and finished it be-

fore Mr. Johnson closed up for Saturday night, but Timmy told Mr. Spaulding it would take a lot of time to make sure the cabinet would fit in just right, and Timmy winked at me when no one was looking and I knew he was going to make Mr. Spaulding go without his fancy van for the whole weekend. I liked that idea.

I walked up and down in my room for a while, trying to think, but the room was small and didn't give me much space, so I went out into the garage again and walked back and forth by the big bay door with the glass windows in it. The street light in front kept it from being real dark in there.

After a while, I went out back and walked around the parking lot, trying to think everything out. I leaned up against the side of Mr. Spaulding's van, sort of doing it on a dare to myself, and I kept on thinking and wondering about Ed and thinking some more.

After a while, it hit me that if Ed had got a hitch, he'd be along any minute. I hurried back into the garage and stood by the bay door and waited.

It took a long while before he showed up. He was walking slow and sort of limping along, so I knew he hadn't got a hitch. He saw me, and I waved to him

and pointed for him to come around the side of the garage.

I went to my room and opened the door to the parking lot in back, and Ed came limping around the corner of the garage and looked at me kind of hardlike and pushed right past me and went into my room and sat down on the edge of my bed.

I had left the radio on all this time, and the country music was going good and loud. Ed reached down and grunted and started pulling off one of his pointy-toe cowboy boots, and he stared at me and said, "Turn that damn thing off!"

I hurried over and turned off the radio. Ed had the boot off by now and was rubbing his foot.

"Hi, Ed," I said, trying to make it sound like I was glad to see him.

"Had to walk all the way out here," he said.

"I'm sorry about that," I told him.

He grunted at me and pulled the boot back on and stood up. "I'm hungry. What you got to eat?"

Mr. Johnson had let me keep a hot plate and one of those small fridges, and I pointed to them in the corner. "Not much, Ed. Just some bread and milk and a jar of jelly, and I think there's still some coffee in the pot on the hot plate over there."

Ed went to the fridge and yanked it open and took out the milk carton and put it to his mouth and took a big swallow. He opened the bread and grabbed a couple of slices. "Gimme something to spread the jelly," he said, not even looking at me.

I got an old table knife from the box where I kept all that kind of stuff and handed it to him. He opened the jelly and slapped gobs of it on the bread slices and took big bites and chewed away and washed everything down with gulps from the milk carton. I stood there and watched him and listened to him make lots of slurping noises, and when he finished he belched loud and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth.

He turned around to me, and this time his look wasn't hard. I thought he might even be grinning a little.

"So here you are, Donny, huh?"

I nodded my head. "Yeah, here I am, Ed."

He sat back down on my bed and pulled a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. He was wearing one of those cowboy shirts, the kind with lots of stitching and two big pockets. He got a kitchen match from his other pocket and lit it with his fingernail. He took a deep

drag on the cigarette and shook the match out and dropped it on the floor in front of my bed. I stayed where I was, standing in the middle of the room.

He blew smoke at the ceiling and looked at me. "Let me spell it out for you, Donny. I got a call yesterday from an old buddy of mine down in Ellenville. You know where that is?"

"Yeah. South of here about ten miles down Route 90 on the other side of the river."

"I was headed there on the bus when it broke down. We just about made it to the depot. They told us we'd have to wait three hours till they could bring in another bus." He took a long drag on his cigarette. "Then I remembered that time you called me at the joint after you got out. You told me you were working at Johnson's garage in this town here—at least that's what I thought I remembered. I took a chance and looked it up in the phone book. Real good luck my finding you, huh?"

He blew more smoke out of the side of his mouth and dropped the cigarette on the floor and stepped on it with the toe of his boot. I didn't say anything.

"I can't wait another three hours for the bus," Ed said, staring straight at me. "I gotta be in Ellenville an hour from now."

I still didn't say anything.

"My buddy who called me got a realsweet job lined up. In and out fast tonight, and we make a bundle. Then we just disappear. You get what I'm talking about, Donny?"

I nodded. "I think so, Ed." I scratched my head. "But ain't you busting parole—I mean, going out of town without permission?"

He looked at me and then threw back his head and laughed. "Yeah—that and pulling this job, too. Donny, old buddy, you're even dumber than you were in the joint, you know that?"

I looked away from him.

"You think maybe I was gonna go back on Monday and report to my parole officer like a good little boy? That what you were thinking, dummy Donny?"

I shook my head.

Ed's face turned serious. "This is a one-time deal. I won't get a chance like this again." He stood up quick and started to walk up and down. "I gotta get to Ellenville. I'm just about broke right now. I got no money, no gun, nothing, just a lousy little pocket knife." He turned and glared at me. "I feel naked, you know that, naked—and I don't like feeling like that."

I tried not to look him in the eye.

"How much money you got?"

I swallowed hard. "About four bucks."

He stared at me.

"I don't get paid much, Ed."

He kept on staring at me. I took out my wallet from my back pocket and pulled out the four bills and handed them to him.

"Those two cars out back the ones you were talking about—the van and the Chevy?"

I nodded.

"Both of them gassed up and ready to roll?"

I nodded again.

"You wouldn't lie to me, would you, Donny?"

"No, Ed, I wouldn't."

"And the keys are in the office?"

"Yes."

"Show me."

I led the way back into the garage and over to the office door near the pay phone on the wall.

Ed tried the door. "It's locked, dammit."

"Mr. Johnson locks everything up at night," I told him. "Except for my room."

Ed looked around, and went over to the big red tool chests against the wall, the ones with all the sliding drawers.

"Timmy locks his tools, too,"

I said.

Ed went over to the workbench. He found an old hammer and screwdriver and a bunch of ignition wires and a lot of other junk. He took the hammer and the screwdriver and went back to the office door. He raised his foot high and kicked it straight out against the office door. It burst open. Ed gave me a look over his shoulder and went into the office, and I followed him. The street light outside gave us enough light to see by.

Ed went straight to Mr. Johnson's old wooden desk. "Which drawer?"

I pointed to the top drawer on the right. Ed didn't even bother to check and make sure it was locked. He stuck the screwdriver into the top of the drawer next to the lock and banged away with the hammer. The drawer popped open.

Ed reached into the drawer and poked around and came up with two sets of keys in his fist. "These them?"

I nodded.

Ed grinned and stuck the screwdriver in his belt and walked over to me. He reached out with his free hand and gave me a light slap on the face. "You coulda done just what I did now, Donny." He gave a little laugh. "And then I wouldn't of had to walk all the way out here, would I? You coulda come

for me at the bus depot just like I asked you to, right?"

I didn't say anything.

Ed gave that little laugh again and sighed. "Well, what could I expect? Always said you were too dumb to steal." He jingled the keys. "You tried it once on your own, and where did it get you? In a cell with me, that's where." He shook his head and stared at me.

I looked down at the pointy toes of his boots.

Ed punched me on the shoulder, not really hard, and turned around and went back into the garage and into my room. I followed him.

Ed stood in my room and looked down at the keys in his hand. "Spaulding Real Estate," he read from the leather key holder. "That's gotta be the luxury van, right?"

I nodded.

"Rich bastard, huh?"

I shrugged.

"Think the van'll get me to Ellenville any faster than the old Chevy?"

I shrugged again.

Ed turned away a little from me, then all of a sudden swung around and slapped me hard in the face. I staggered back and fell down on my bed and sat up and rubbed my face where he hit me and looked up at him.

He was smiling. "That's for being too dumb to even answer

me." He tossed the van's keys next to me on the bed. "I'd get real far driving a splashy van like that through this hick town, wouldn't I? Bet it's the only one like it, right?"

I rubbed my face again. It still stung.

"Sit there," Ed said.

He went out of the room and back into the garage. I heard him at the workbench, and then he came back holding the bunch of ignition wires. He dropped them on the bed, and before I even knew it was coming, his fist smashed into the side of my face.

I fell over on my side on the bed. My head was spinning. I felt him pulling my hands behind me and holding my wrists together. And then there was something being wrapped tight around my wrists, and I knew it was one of the ignition wires. I tried to sit up, but he pushed me down on the bed and then he grabbed my feet and another ignition wire went around my ankles. He worked fast, while I was still a little dizzy, and then real quick he had me all tied up like one of those little calves the cowboys rope in rodeos on TV.

He grabbed me by the front of my shirt and pulled me up so that I was sort of curled up on the edge of the bed facing him. He slapped me again, then

backhanded me with another slap. My eyes started to tear.

"Know why I'm doing this, Donny?" he said. He slapped me again. "Maybe you think it's because you wouldn't come and get me at the depot like I asked?" Another slap. "No, it's not really that, old buddy." My face was on fire. "But it would have told me something if you'd busted into the office like I just did and got the keys and come out to me." The slap was even harder this time. "It woulda told me that you were still my real buddy, just like back in the cell, and I might've said to myself, well now, little Donny might be just the one to take along with me to Ellenville and then we could hang around together afterward and have lots of money to spend." He slapped me two more times and let go and I fell back on the bed.

"But it didn't work out that way, did it?" I heard him say. My ears were ringing now, and his voice came through all muffled and far away. "I don't like it when things don't work out for me."

He grabbed my shirt again and pulled me up. I looked up at him, blinking because my eyes were tearing. He gave me that little laugh again. "I'm really doing this to help you, Donny." This time his fist smashed into my nose. I felt it

crunch and tasted blood. "I still like you. You can't help that you're dumb." His fist got me on the jaw. I felt like I was blacking out, but the pain kept me from going under. "When they find you, you can tell them I beat you until you told me where the keys were, and then I tied you up so you couldn't call for help after I left."

He held me up by my shirt, and through the tears I could see him looking at me and then shaking his head. "Doesn't look right," he said. "Gotta make this look real so they'll believe you." His fist smashed into me two more times, one after the other, first in the eye and then on the side of my head.

He let go of me. I fell back on the bed. I heard him moving around and then the door shut. Then there was the sound of Charlie Fenway's old Chevy starting up and the squeal of the tires when he pulled out of the parking lot.

It was quiet in the garage now. I lay there on the bed and tried to breathe through all the blood in my nose and mouth, and the pain kept me from passing out and I was glad of that. I wanted to be conscious when they came to get me.

I lay there and thought how they'd have to believe me now when I told them the truth.

They really couldn't think I had been in on this with Ed, even if they found out later that we were cellmates back upstate. They'd have to believe that no one would take this kind of a beating just to make it look good. Ed had really done me a favor. He hadn't really meant to. He was just talking when he said that. He liked beating me up. I knew that. He got a kick out of it, and that's why he did it. But it was going to turn out to be a good thing for me that I was so beat up when they came and found me.

I lay there and waited for them to come. It would be soon, I knew. Ed would never make it across the river to Route 90.

I could see it inside my head — Ed driving up to the toll bridge at the river and reaching out to pay the dollar toll at the one booth they kept open at night, reaching out of the old Chevy's window to put a dollar bill into the hand of Charlie Fenway where his wife had dropped him off for the night shift on the bridge.

And even with all the pain, I kept this picture in my head while I lay there and waited and wondered why, back there in the cell, I had one time thought it might be nice to be as smart as Ed.

Hide and Seek

Melissa Milich

When I was nine years old, I read my first Nancy Drew book, *The Clue of the Broken Locket*, and for some time after that the only thing I wanted to do in my life was solve a mystery, preferably one that had stumped the police. I even carried a magnifying glass from a Cracker Jack box around with me in case I stumbled upon some clues. Just like Nancy Drew, Girl Detective. I ached for her spunk, her courage, her moral fiber, and most of all her interesting life because I grew up in a small town where nothing ever happened.

But as I got older (approximately four times as old if you're counting), the thought of a mystery in my life was something I wanted to avoid, kind of like a flat tire, an inconvenience.

I'm a person who likes to find her keys in the morning. I like to know where my purse is, how much money is in it, and what I'm having for dinner. An ordered life. I have been working at the same job for the last ten years, society editor at the

local newspaper. I wear white blouses to work, and to me it's a personal accomplishment to get through the day without getting ink marks all over them.

I thought my Nancy Drew days were gone forever, but then Naomi Ray, a dead body, came into my life.

It's probably more accurate to call Naomi Ray a missing person because nobody had actually located her body. She simply disappeared one day, vanished it seems, off the face of the earth. She could have been snatched by a UFO, but more than a few people suspected her husband, Cyrus. Trouble is, Cyrus Ray was a member of the Rotary club and a church volunteer, what you call a pillar of the community, and pillars don't go around knocking off their wives. He let the police come in the house and go through everything just like you would expect a pillar of the community to do. He said he had nothing to hide.

And you can't convict somebody without a body. So then Cyrus started getting all this

sympathy from the community because the sheriff decided Naomi simply woke up one day wondering why she had married Cyrus in the first place and walked away from her old life. He said she was probably living in another state with a new haircut.

Naomi's side of the family didn't believe it for a minute. They said Naomi would never have abandoned them, her parents and sisters. Plus, Naomi supposedly disappeared with nothing, not even her most valuable emerald necklace that she could have sold if she'd wanted to start a new life somewhere else. They were sure she was murdered, and Naomi's family continued to harrass Cyrus Ray until finally a judge ordered them to stop.

Then one day Naomi's sister Elaine asked *me* to help them put Cyrus Ray behind bars. I think originally she just dropped by the newspaper to ask me to run an announcement from her church, but instead she brought up Naomi, and I had to tell her what everybody'd been telling the family for the past three years. "They have closed the case, Elaine."

"But if we could only find her body! I just can't stand the thought of him walking around a free man while Naomi "

Her voice trailed off, and I handed her a box of tissues.

At that point I started thinking about Naomi Ray so hard that I got distracted and careless with my ink pen and made a big line right across the front of my blouse.

Elaine continued crying. "Please. Please."

So there she was squeezing this crumpled tissue, and before I got a grip on myself, I *promised*. Something got into me that afternoon. In fact, I gave her my Girl Scout promise which was something else left over from being nine years old. But I still couldn't figure out why she had asked me and exactly what I had promised.

"I'm not really sure," Elaine said, "except you're wearing red."

That I was. A red skirt with my now inkstained white blouse, but what did this have to do—

"Naomi was wearing her red dress when she disappeared."

Naomi Ray was standing in a grove of frightening looking trees. I thought she had the look of a lost little girl on her face—in the painting.

Cyrus Ray had won a prize at the county fair for this artistic rendition of his wife. It was hanging in his kitchen over the butcher block where Cyrus was

going chop chop chop with a huge meat cleaver.

"Now, why am I a celebrity, Candace Sue?" He moved from around the table, that cleaver in his hand.

We have this feature in the newspaper called *Celebrity Chef*. I came up with the idea myself, where members of the community, "celebrities," which just means somebody like the fire chief or the district attorney, since we don't have any of the *Current Affair* type of celebrities around, share a special recipe.

"Well, because of your painting talent," I said.

Boy, could I lie. You would think all those years at Catholic school would have made me at least blush a little bit when I lied that tremendously. But maybe he did have some kind of twisted talent. I could hardly take my eyes off Naomi's portrait.

Cyrus was busy making a Chinese chicken salad. This *Celebrity Chef* thing had gone to his head. I could tell. I personally thought he was using way too much mayonnaise.

"That's a pretty skirt you're wearing, Candace Sue."

"You must like red, Cyrus."

He chuckled and looked very pleased. "Why, how did you know?"

"Naomi's wearing a red dress in that picture."

I'm never going to get very far in this detecting stuff, especially if I give all my prime clues away to the prime suspect. I got out of there as soon as I could think of an excuse to leave, even though Cyrus wanted me to stay and eat some of his mayonnaise-heavy Chinese chicken salad. He didn't act like he suspected anything.

I returned to the newspaper office and sat down at my desk and tried to draw the portrait of Naomi as best I could from memory, but it wasn't good enough. All I could remember were those frightening looking trees, but I thought there might have been something else in the picture besides trees and Naomi in that unlucky red dress.

Big Tim McCallister, the sheriff's deputy, was walking my way. He always stopped at my desk when he was at the newspaper for other business. I was getting tired of being single, but me and Big Tim McCallister? I wasn't so sure that would work. He seemed kind of slow and awkward and didn't talk more than he needed to. Where was Ned Nickerson—Nancy Drew's

shining boyfriend—when you needed him?

"Tim, have there been any new developments on the Naomi Ray case?"

So much for easing up to the subject.

"Come on, Candace Sue. She took her jewelry and left town."

"She didn't take her emerald necklace."

Tim shook his head. "Naomi's relatives been by, haven't they? Those people just won't give up."

That took care of my asking for his help on this case, so instead I asked Deputy McCallister for his pork rind recipe for the Celebrity Chef column. I set up an appointment to interview him and dropped the subject of Naomi Ray.

But as soon as he left, I pulled out my drawing again and tried to remember more, because I knew there was something else in Naomi's portrait, something I had left out.

"Well, you know, Cyrus, I would like someone to go to a movie with once in a while. *Interview with the Vampire's* coming to town soon."

It made me absolutely sick at my stomach to pretend to flirt with Cyrus Ray, but a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do. And it got me inside his house again.

I went with a camera around my neck and told Cyrus I had to take his photo to go along with the recipe.

"I didn't know you were a photographer, Candace Sue."

"Anybody can push a button down on a camera."

If this had been a Nancy Drew book, Cyrus Ray would have gotten rid of the portrait by now, but no, it was still hanging up in the exact same spot over the cutting board and I backed Cyrus up to that. Either Cyrus Ray was innocent or he wasn't as smart as a Nancy Drew type of crook. Or maybe I was just getting better at this detecting business.

"You want me to hold up a knife or anything?" Cyrus asked.

"That would probably add some realism."

But where he was standing he blocked too much of the picture. "No. Over to the left. Just a little bit over to the left. Perfect. *Perfect.*"

I had to wonder how that eerie portrait of Naomi Ray ever won a prize (first prize yet) at the county fair, unless it was just a sympathy vote. Like I said, a lot of people still felt very sorry for Cyrus Ray. I supposed the technique and composition were good, but the rest of the painting was just plain

weird. *Twilight Zone* stuff. One of Cyrus's painted trees was twisted into the shape of a beautiful woman's body with what looked to me like a face on it screaming in pain. I was hovering over the photograph with a magnifying glass just like my hero Nancy Drew would have done, but the longer I stared, the more my eyes seemed to play tricks on me.

I'd had Barney, the staff photographer, develop my film as soon as I returned to the office, even though he was kind of ticked at me for borrowing his camera without asking. But he printed up the pictures just like I asked, cutting Cyrus out completely and enlarging Naomi's portrait in the background.

I had seen those trees before. If only I could remember where, I might find Naomi's body buried right underneath them. I had nothing else to go on. Where had I seen those trees? *You can't see the forest for the trees.* Now what made me think of that? I looked to see what else was in the picture to give me some point of reference. I hadn't paid much attention to the rest of the picture, the background for the trees, something that looked like a long white arm.

*

I picked up the telephone and changed my appointment to meet Big Tim McCallister for his Celebrity Chef interview, and then I went down to the county offices. I wanted to look at a geological map. Derrick Seever, who sat in the map room, was flapping his face with a Chinese restaurant takeout menu.

"Can't take any more of this hot weather, Candace Sue. I'm putting in a pool. My kids will love it."

"A big pool?"

"A couple of guys from Rotary had pools put in during that heat wave a couple of years ago. It wasn't that expensive. They rented a bulldozer, and Cyrus Ray helped them out."

"Cyrus Ray?"

"He's good with cement. You done with this map?"

I nodded, and Derrick put it back on the shelf. "You know, while I'm here, there are some other things I'm wondering if you'd help me look up."

"Sure. It's a slow day."

I knew I had seen those trees before. When we were kids, my cousins and I played hide and seek in that very same grove of trees, and it looked just as Cyrus had painted it after Naomi disappeared.

It was nearing five o'clock in the afternoon, which was a pretty time to be in the woods. The sun wasn't hitting so hard, and it filtered through the branches of the trees and danced on the ground like magic crystals. The freeway overpass just to the north of the grove was new and added a lot of noise to this once secluded area. But still, nothing much had changed, and I hung my arm around the trunk of one of the trees like it was an old friend and wondered if it was time to bring Deputy McCallister in on my discovery.

This had been our very favorite spot to play hide and seek because of the faces on the trees. It was just the way the bark curled and knotted, but the faces we saw added a spooky element to our game that we couldn't replicate anywhere else. I guessed it was still a good spot for hide and seek, because when I took a deep breath of my past and turned around, Cyrus Ray came out behind the shadow of a tree.

We didn't say anything for the longest time. Our eyes locked on each other's, and all this communication just buzzed between us like electricity. I could feel it, but then again, maybe it was my own fear.

"Do you see the faces?" Cyrus Ray said. "The trees have faces, Candace Sue. I knew you would want to come out here to see them again." He stroked his hand down the side of the tree and then faced me. "I wish you all would just leave me alone. I have nothing to hide, Candace Sue."

"That's what you keep saying, but I don't believe it any more."

"So I turned the tables and have been following you around, Candace Sue. Except for this afternoon. I knew you would come out here this afternoon. Normally I'd say a pretty girl like you should find better things to do with her life, but I think it's too late for that."

It wouldn't have done any good to scream for help. All the five o'clock traffic heading home on the overpass was making too much noise for anyone to hear me, so instead I started shouting Naomi's name—don't ask me why—"Naomi! Naomi!," which unraveled Cyrus enough to give me a little bit of a head start when I started running away from him.

But a little bit of a head start wasn't enough for someone who had dropped out of her aerobics class. There was a steep hill in the way that would kill me before Cyrus had a chance, but halfway up I tripped over a root

in the ground and fell on my face. Cyrus grabbed my ankle, and I kicked his hand away. We started sliding down the hill together, and I was still scrambling to get away, not even caring if my underwear was showing big time. His big hand grabbed my ankle again and twisted it till it hurt.

"Stop it, Cyrus!"

Only when I heard the voice of Deputy Big Tim McCallister did I allow myself to stop clawing at the dirt. I heard two clicks of a gun, and I knew he was pointing it at Cyrus Ray. I turned my head to make sure, and there was Big Tim looking about as surprised as I had ever seen him, looking at me and then at Cyrus and then back at me, and I realized I was an absolute mess.

"Is this why you wanted me to meet you way out here for my pork rind recipe?" Big Tim asked.

He was still pointing the gun at Cyrus, though he wasn't exactly sure why. He came over to me and put his arm around my shoulders, and I let myself lean against him. "Are you all right, Candace Sue?"

I was still breathing really hard, trying to wipe the dirt off my face while Cyrus Ray hurled every insult in the book at me. "Naomi's out here," I said. "Real close."

"Go ahead," Cyrus Ray said. "Dig up every tree if you want to. You'll never find her."

"He's right, Big Tim. We could dig up every tree in the county, and I still don't think we'd find Naomi Ray." I pointed at the stand of trees, acres and acres of trees. "She's not buried down here."

For one moment Cyrus looked relieved, smug even.

"She's buried up there." Three heads looked up to where the cars were passing overhead on the freeway overpass, the long white arm of Cyrus's painting.

"You're good with cement, aren't you, Cyrus?"

You might think a body embedded in a freeway overpass would be harder to find than a needle in a haystack. Not to mention more expensive. But it really wasn't.

It took me a little while to convince Deputy McCallister, however, even though he knew I was onto something the moment he saw the sick look on Cyrus Ray's face.

When I'd been at the county offices that afternoon, I'd found out that the overpass was still being built when Naomi Ray disappeared. It was just a matter then of going back through the engineering log to pinpoint the section under construction

at the time, the night Cyrus carried her body out there and covered her up with his own cement, doing such a fine job the construction workers never noticed.

The county narrowed down the section pretty close and decided to put in some earthquake supports in case this turned out to be a wild goose chase, but they found Naomi right away. Some threads from her red dress were still clinging to her bones.

I couldn't face going out there, so I stayed home to try to get those dirt stains out of my blouse. It was time to go back to my humdrum life, and after sliding down the hill with Cyrus Ray, that sounded good to me.

But one other thing happened.

"Hey, Candace Sue."

It was Big Tim McCallister at my door. "You all right?"

I giggled because he'd been asking me that so much the last couple of days.

"Candace Sue, I don't have anybody to take to the Tri-County Sheriff's Department Dance, and it's this Saturday," he began. Then he stopped.

So I said, "What about me?"

"Well, okay then."

He turned to go. "I already bought the tickets. In fact, I already wrote our names on them."

"Taking a few things for granted, aren't you, Big Tim?"

"No. Too much of that going on around here already."

The Witch and the Rock Star

Angela Zeman

"Let's get this meeting going, folks, we got business to attend to and then something I think you're all gonna be interested in—" The gavel that Mayor Harold Harper had been banging on the scarred oak table in a steady rhythm, like percussion punctuation, slipped out of his hands. As he stooped with an "oof" to retrieve it, none of the Wyndham-by-the-Sea Board of Village Trustees could distinguish the rest of his words, but they didn't care. They were too busy twisting in their seats, eyeing the young man sitting towards the back of the large, mostly empty room.

Muscular youths in tight bluejeans, black motorcycle boots, and leather jackets with little chains on the pockets worn over artfully ripped white T-shirts were not an unknown item in tourist-ridden Wyndham. But they were rare at Village Board meetings.

Sensing the mood of his audience, the mayor raced through formalities and reports and stopped on a dime at the point:

"This young man, uh, Mark Daniels is his name, is the personal manager—" Here he paused to garner the attention of all the board members. An unnecessary ploy—they were rabid with curiosity. "—the personal manager of . . . Phantom. You folks know that name, I'm sure . . . the rock star?"

Only nine ladies and gentlemen sat on the board this term, but the hiss of their accumulated intaken breath would have brought credit to the entire reptile house at the Bronx Zoo. Only one hapless soul asked, quaveringly, "Who . . ." He was ignored.

"We're faced tonight with an opportunity, it seems. But I'll let my friend Mark here explain. Mark?"

Skip Dolan rose, paused for an extra dose of oxygen and a last reminder to think of himself from here on in as "Mark Daniels," and ambled to the front. He stepped onto the elevated plywood platform that served to remind the board that the mayor—although short in stature—was a man of importance, and faced the board



MRS. RISK VISITED THE SPRAWLING PROPERTY THAT BORDERED THE WEST OF PHANTOM'S LOT—A SHUTTERED SUMMER RESIDENCE.

members. He nodded a thank you and smiled warmly at Mayor Harper, and at the nine. Then he spoke:

"My boss, as you've probably heard, covers the entire world on his concert tours. He believes, you know, in doing his part for democracy, taking other countries the message through his music, you know . . . like an ambassador. Only not paid by the government." He smiled again. They beamed back, obviously taken with the idea of an unpaid ambassador spreading the message of democracy.

"Well, as much as he loves everybody, loves democracy and the world, he gets so worn down that he has to get away now and then. You know. Away from people who all want to—to shake his hand, that kind of thing. It gets so he's like a prisoner of his fame. And so a friend of his told him about this cute little village, being so pretty and right on the water of Long Island Sound and everything, and he thought it'd be a great place to have a house. A real home, where he could sorta hide away from everyone and get himself back together. So he can do more tours, more shows, you know. He sent me to look it over and talk to you guys . . . that kinda thing."

"A house?" repeated one of the trustees, a compact dark man with black and grey stubble on his cheeks. Dr. Villas. He looked doubtful.

A tall dapper man with sleek silver hair, Mr. Harder, snapped to attention. He owned a realty firm.

"What about drugs, booze, screaming parties, that sort of thing?" put in a tall woman. Ms. Bellwood. She owned a bookstore and valued the peace and quiet of Wyndham.

"Oh no, ma'am. He doesn't even smoke, for his voice."

A few people nodded to each other and commented on how nice Phantom's voice really was.

Skip waited until they settled down. "You see, when I say he gets tired, I mean he gets dead tired. Almost like sick. He'd be more interested in healthy food, quiet breezes, swimming in Long Island Sound, and no noise to disturb *him*. His nerves get shot, ma'am." He paused and everyone waited expectantly.

"If you and I can reach an agreement, I'm supposed to scout out and buy property for him, hire a contractor, and all that. Construct a place for him tailored to his special needs. He wouldn't be interested in any house already built. Like, I'd have to fix him up a sound stu-

dio. Don't worry about the noise, though, that's sound-proofed so even he couldn't hear himself in the next room."

The board members tittered at the thought that he couldn't hear himself.

The mayor cleared his throat. "And, Mark, where would Phantom get these materials, these contractors, the workmen, supplies, and so on? His food and services?" he asked, speaking with a heavy significance.

"Why, right here in Wyndham, mayor. Like we discussed before the meeting."

Mayor Harper turned to the board and smiled meaningfully. "Got that, folks? Here in Wyndham. Where unemployment's been godawful these last two years. Even the tourists been stayin' home in times like these. Think of it. First the land, then a *mansion*—with all the accoutrements—" His eyebrows wiggled gleefully. He owned a hardware store. "Housekeepers, groceries, gardeners, landscaping, God only knows. Spreadin' his money around here for years. Forever, if we keep him happy."

"And how do we keep him happy?" asked the doctor sourly.

The mayor, who'd never liked the doctor, leaned forward ponderously. "By keeping our

damned traps shut, my dear sir. No gossip. He wants privacy and plenty of it."

"But the publicity!" a lady in the second row with suspiciously bright red hair cried out. She edited the village's local weekly newspaper. "Tourism could explode here if we could take advantage of his presence."

"Great," said Skip with a grimace. "People'd be climbing his gates. He'd have to hire bodyguards to get him in and out of the house. He'd be just as much a prisoner here as on tour."

"Listen, folks. People get mad if he's not good-natured with them every second. They stick their noses in his lunch, then complain how stuck up he is if he tries to move over. I know, 'cause he has to do it every day on tour. Think about it. Wouldn't that drive you people nuts? If he doesn't find a place to go, a place just to be quiet and rest, he'll go stark raving crazy. Do you know where he has to go to get away nowadays? Like a vacation? He checks into a hospital."

"No." Ms. Bellwood was aghast.

"Yes," insisted Skip. He knew it was true because he'd read all about it in the newspaper while eating a snack in Atlantic City. He'd been struck then by how sad that was. "He

wants to stroll down into the village and shop, just live quiet, like everybody else."

"Hear that?" put in the mayor eagerly. "He wants to shop!"

"But—" the redhaired lady began again.

A man in a suit of obviously foreign cut and astronomical cost, a board member who hadn't spoken before—Mr. Drexel—held up a single finger, which silenced her. It silenced everybody. He held the second highest executive position in Wyndham's single industrial business, which paid the majority of village taxes. He nodded. "Yes, I've heard that, about the hospital. It's true."

Mayor Harper grimaced at him. Deferring to others didn't come easily to the mayor. "You're right, sir. You're a wonderful judge of character, as we all know. When you meet him, you won't get over just how plain and down-to-earth Phantom really is," continued the mayor expansively to the entire board, draping one arm over Skip's shoulder in a brotherly fashion.

"How would you know?" asked the doctor skeptically.

"Why, Mark told me. True?" he asked Skip.

"Oh, true," said Skip. He smiled again. His cheeks were beginning to ache.

"Well, great, but you can't hide him here forever. People'll recognize him. Word'll get out," said the doctor.

"If you don't think you can do it..." Skip shrugged doubtfully.

"Now, hang on. You know what? We won't wait for people to find out, we'll tell them." The mayor leaned forward, bracing his arms on the table. "We'll get the whole village in on it. He promises to spend his money here—well, we'll promise to keep his presence to ourselves. Totally. It's the only humane thing to do."

"We could adopt him," said Ms. Bellwood, standing up in her enthusiasm. She had a kind face, thought Skip. And she was attractive for a middle-aged lady, he thought further. Nice body for a thirty-year-old.

"That's a great idea," declared the mayor. "We'll *adopt* him. Phantom will be Wyndham's Secret Son. I think people'll like thinking about him that way. He needs us to help him rest and recuperate. We'll make sure he gets his slightest wish fulfilled. We'll make his life here... a joy. An absolute joy."

"And he'll pay for it," said the doctor.

The mayor eyed him suspiciously, but the doctor seemed agreeable. Then again, Mayor

Harper thought, doctors usually were agreeable about money. As were mayors, sighed Mayor Harper truthfully to himself, but only to himself.

A short man with white hair lifted a timorous hand as he rose from his seat and began making his way to the front. "You'll be wanting to talk with me, young man."

The mayor said, "Ah yes. May I introduce Horace Arsdale—our banker, Mark."

After more discussion, endless questions which Skip answered patiently, and then handshaking and introductions all around, he left with Mr. Arsdale clinging to his arm.

Skip's facial muscles twitched all night in his sleep from strain, but he was at Mr. Arsdale's bank early the next day, regardless.

Mr. Arsdale beamed as brightly as the spring sun when he retrieved Skip's check for forty-five thousand dollars from his desk, with Skip's parting words ringing majestically in his ears: "This's just a small token to open the account until the boss transfers building funds, and of course his living funds, from his regular bank."

Mr. Arsdale had been positively thrilled to approve Phantom's unsecured loan for a private residence. Everybody

knew Phantom. In his mind, Mr. Arsdale feasted on the future delights of a friendship with this international celebrity. Horace M. Arsdale—banker to the stars. Harry and Phantom—pals.

To save time, Skip took Ernie Block, a local builder he'd hired on Mayor Harper's recommendation, with him when his realty agent, Conrad Harder, Jr. (beloved only son of Mr. Harder the trustee), drove him to see the first piece of property. Since the property didn't border Long Island Sound, Skip rejected it immediately.

"I did think I'd mentioned it last night to your dad, Conrad. That we want to be on the water, you know?"

"Ah, you're right, sir, you did, sir." Since Conrad was at least twice Skip's age, Skip had to conceal a grimace at the "sir."

At the next location, Skip got out of the car. Conrad was practically quivering with excitement... not an attractive sight in an older man, thought Skip. Obviously, here was land Conrad ached to sell him.

A grassy twenty foot cliff overlooked a stretch of pristine beach and a view that could soothe the most ragged of nerves. Beyond the beach stretched the vast sound, disguising the distant Connecticut shore as a misty Camelot. On

this side, the waves hushed and sighed serenely against the sand. The property was vacant except for a large deck made of age-silvered cedar that jutted out over the cliff's edge and trailed ramshackle steps down to the beach—perfect for al fresco anything. From the vantage point of this deck, Skip turned his back on the water and scanned the perimeter of the property. Wide and deep, bordered on the east and west with wooded hills—was this lot within the price range outlined to Mr. Harder, Sr.?

Conrad confirmed it. He admitted it'd been on the market for years . . . the recession, he explained with embarrassment. Well, Skip could certainly understand tough financial times. They shook hands, and Conrad raced back to the office to begin the paperwork, leaving Skip and his builder pacing outlines in the grass.

That afternoon, checks for earnest money to the builder and the realtor were exchanged for special permission from the absent owners to begin building right away, to accommodate Phantom's pressing schedule. The transaction might have been unconventional, but no one minded.

On the day the bulldozers arrived to start digging the foun-

dation, a tall, thin figure, silhouetted against the morning sun, appeared on a hill to the east of the property. Wrapped in black robes whipped by the breeze, he, or she, stood gazing down on the proceedings.

Eyeing the dark figure uneasily, Skip asked the builder who this could be. Ernie, an easygoing older man with a pot belly, possessed a shrewd intelligence that Skip had quickly learned to trust. He and Ernie had felt at ease with each other's good sense right from the start.

Ernie grinned at Skip's nervousness. "Just our local witch. Mrs. Risk. She'll be your neighbor come the end of sixty days when we get this house finished."

"A real witch?" Skip gave Ernie a sideways glance to see if he was being ragged.

Ernie removed his Giants cap and scratched at his thinning hair. "Well, that's what some say. She does seem to know things nobody else'd even guess at.

"Nice woman, I think, although some'll tell you different. The thing is, the ones who disagree are those I wouldn't trust with a bent nail." Ernie shot a glance at his young employer. "It's been said that if people get into trouble—which

just about anybody alive does, y'gotta admit—she's awful good at doing what needs to be done."

Skip gave a short laugh. "For them, or to them?"

Ernie wagged his head side to side. "She is an odd bird." He grinned at Skip, then picked up his sheets of plans. "Got a sharp tongue on her, too," he added as if in admiration. "I got the idea that a long time ago, when someone first called her 'witch,' they were thinking the word started with *b*. Some just can't stand a woman smarter than they are who doesn't hesitate to tell them unpleasant truths." He chuckled to himself, then concentrated on his layouts.

Skip stared curiously at the figure until she suddenly turned and descended the rise, disappearing from his sight. Then he forgot her and began discussing stucco walls with Ernie.

He didn't even remember her two days later when the carpenter was killed, picked off by a rifleshot where he rested, perched on a piece of stone, while his buddy fetched more nails from the truck.

The village constable called in the county's Sixth Precinct homicide squad, who finally allowed the carpenter's body to be taken away. The lingering

shock was still severe. Skip canceled everything for the day, even deliveries.

After buying the men a restorative beer at Murphy's, he watched them hurry home. He thought about how someday he'd be hurrying home to Alexia in times of trouble . . . if he could pull this off.

It baffled him why anybody would shoot the carpenter, who'd seemed to be a pleasant guy, a hard worker with a family. As he ordered himself another beer, he wondered uneasily if it had anything to do with his scheme. . . .

He painstakingly reexamined the details of this last—his very last—attempt to solve his problem. The problem wasn't a new one to mankind anywhere—he needed money. Lots of money.

At first he'd tried saving it, skimping on food and clothes. But as he lost weight and stuffed cardboard into his work shoes, he realized that even if he starved it could take decades to accumulate the nest egg he needed. He tried investing in a small enterprise a school friend had started, and lost both his money and his friend. Other schemes had made him rich only in experience, but at least he'd kept the rest of his friends.

That's when he'd begun working the lottery, buying hundreds of lottery tickets, until it became obvious that he wasn't destined for any winning ticket—anywhere—anytime.

Then, down to the last of his savings and out of ideas, he'd driven to Atlantic City. In this final, desperate ploy, either he would win enough money to marry his angel, the female he ached for with every ounce of his being, or . . . he could think of nothing else to do . . . he'd jump into the cold dirty ocean that ran alongside the casinos and drown himself.

It would take a miraculous run of luck, but how else could he ever marry Alexia—gorgeous, laughing, light as air Alexia, whose parents had always provided her with the finest clothes and a luxurious home? Alexia, who, Skip never doubted, could choose any man she wanted . . . and she'd chosen him. How could he ask her to accept so much less than she was used to having?

He remembered that last fatal day, the final day when everything had happened, when fate had brought the edges of his plan together . . . he'd gone to pick up Alexia up from her job as a grocery store cashier. He remembered thinking as he'd stood to one side, watching

her finish with the last customer of the day, that she was the object of his dreams, the future mother of his future children, the most breathtakingly beautiful female he'd ever seen in his life.

After pulling her jacket from under the counter and holding it for her, he'd swept her to his chest with one well-muscled arm. She'd giggled and squirmed out of his grasp. "Outside, Skip. Wait a second, will you?" he remembered her saying.

He'd yielded and followed her outside, but for the thousandth time he was dizzy with both bliss and despair as he watched her walk with dancing steps through the automatic doors.

When they reached his pickup truck, he opened the door for her. As she beamed at him, he remembered noticing how, when her pale hair moved in the cool breeze, it caught the light the same way that fishing line catches the sun on a sultry afternoon.

He'd driven her home, only letting her escape after ransoming herself with dozens of sweet-tasting, tender kisses. She'd whispered in his ear that she loved him, but by then he was so sunk in misery that he hardly heard her. Would he ever see her again? Only luck would decide.

After topping off his gas tank at the self-service station, he'd begun the trek to Atlantic City in New Jersey. He'd had plenty of time to think, then. To worry.

An apprentice carpenter's salary was better than a gas station attendant's, and he wouldn't be an apprentice forever, but the fortunes of those in the building trades rose and fell with roller-coaster irregularity. What could he give her besides babies and bills and a sorry little house in mid-island? She only worked as a cashier now because she thought she was too old to be totally dependent on her parents. He certainly wouldn't want her to keep working when the babies came.

She had soft hands, soft lips, a soft voice, and soft skin, like a princess. Skip had seen what a penny-pinching life took out of a woman. How it roughened their skin. Hardened their voices. Worry could squeeze the sweetness right out of a woman's nature. He'd seen it happen to his mother. He wouldn't risk that happening to his Alexia.

He had patted the rolled-up savings that made a thick ball in his pocket before gripping the steering wheel with white-knuckled determination.

Seven hours later, he'd counted out his take with the house manager . . . twenty thousand, twenty thousand five hundred . . . in a voice hoarse from shouting at the dice, lack of sleep, and too many coffees alternated with whiskies.

At the end of the count, he breathed deep to steady himself, then rolled it all up into four bundles that he shoved deep into his pockets. He walked out of the casino, across the boardwalk, onto the sand, then leaned against a piling and inhaled the salt air, ridding his lungs of stale smoke and bar fumes.

Fifty thousand dollars. His shocked elation made him dizzy—until he suddenly remembered Alexia's last birthday present from her parents. The sticker price for that little convertible was double what Skip paid in a year for his apartment. His precious goal, which for a few seconds he'd imagined won, slipped tortuously far from his grasp—again.

Fifty thousand dollars might seem a fortune to Skip, but to Alexia . . . he knew it wouldn't be enough. He glanced swiftly up at the sky after that admission, ducking in case of retribution for ingratitude, because he'd lit a candle in church before coming.

Well—that's it, he thought. And he meant it.

No longer despairing, feeling only numb from hopelessness, he walked off down the beach to work a few kinks out of his cramped muscles in preparation for diving, once and for ever, into the water that beckoned beyond the pilings.

And it was while he was walking that he got it. The whole idea. It burst into his head full-grown, bypassing babyhood and adolescence. It stopped him dead in his tracks. He spent several minutes examining it up and down and backwards and inside out but found no flaws. And so he drove home. . . .

The next day the homicide detective told Skip that the bullet was a common .303 used in hunting rifles. Though the killing was tragic, it was probably a hunting accident. The woods around Phantom's long-vacant property were known to be full of small game. Lots of hunters in the area, more than usual in the last few economically lean years. The perpetrator would possibly never be discovered.

Skip explained all this to Ernie and Ernie's crew. Even though the men were understandably upset at the loss of their friend, several shoulders

lowered in an easing of tension at hearing that it could've been a hunting accident, and work resumed.

After a few more days, the crews were working up to speed again, and the shock faded.

Then, a week later, Ernie stepped into an animal trap. Ernie, a normally soft-spoken man, screamed in a shrill agony that caused the men to drop their tools and run to him from all over the site. The trap, an old iron one that he swore hadn't been there the day before, was big enough to incapacitate a full-grown bear. Although the rusted jaws could've severed his leg, he was luckily wearing work boots that limited the damage to broken bones.

As the ambulance trundled an agonized but sedated Ernie to St. Charles hospital, the men stared at each other with white faces. Skip was speechless. Without being told, Ernie's assistant, using Skip's car phone, called the constable, who immediately called homicide again.

After much discussion, even Skip had to admit that the detective's theory—that it was only more hunting equipment, long forgotten and overlooked by Ernie's crew—was somewhat reasonable.

The lot, he remembered Conrad's saying, had stood vacant for years. The men agreed with the detective, although he could tell they were uneasy about it. He didn't blame them. He wasn't too convinced himself, but at least Ernie would definitely be okay, suffering only a broken leg, unlike the poor carpenter. After an hour's milling about and an early lunch, the men returned to work. It sure was a puzzle.

A few days later, Skip "heard" from his boss.

Skip called an impromptu meeting at the mayor's office. After offhandedly pointing out the report of Phantom's whereabouts in the *Newsday* newspaper (Liz Smith's column) to Mayor Harper, Mr. Drexel, Dr. Villas, Harder, Sr., the nice-looking Ms. Bellwood, Conrad, and Ernie's assistant, Skip showed them the message Phantom had faxed from Eastern Europe where he was doing benefits for the newly formed ex-Soviet Satellite countries.

The lengthy communication, typed in faded, "foreign looking" letters, complimented his manager, Mark Daniels, and the people working so hard from the village of Wyndham-by-the-Sea, for their quick work in carrying out his—Phantom's—wishes.

However—and it was a big however—Phantom stated that he was walking a mental and physical tightrope that could snap at any time, so he'd be flying directly to Wyndham in his private jet from the last gig on his tour.

"Mark" must speed up work even more, and arrange safe shipment of his furniture, art collection, sound equipment, and so forth, from where they were presently being stored so that all would be in place for his arrival. Phantom's tour was at a particularly manic stage. In lieu of transferring funds from bank to bank—a nightmarish tangle of transactions when attempted from deep within the Eastern Bloc—he promised to settle all accounts fully the day he arrived. From that point, Phantom said, he looked forward to the complete rest and total quiet promised him by the villagers of beautiful Wyndham-by-the-Sea. "See you all soon. Phantom."

Mr. Harder and Mr. Arsdale, who'd jointly been pressing Skip for additional deposits and signed papers, retreated in awe. "All accounts settled fully" . . . the words floated in the air like the promise of paradise. With a flourish, Skip wrote out another draft on the borrowed bank funds and handed it to Ernie's assistant.

"To hire new crews?" asked the assistant.

Skip nodded gravely.

"You got it, boss," he said, and he marched smartly out of the mayor's office to notify Ernie and collect more men.

Conrad prodded his father with an elbow and Mr. Harder, Sr., cleared his throat. "Well, I hate to bother you, Mark, but you know, we haven't closed on this property yet. Strictly speaking, the owners have every right—"

Before he could finish speaking, Skip wrote out a check to "cash" for ten thousand dollars. Word had trickled back to Skip through the subcontractors and thus through Ernie that Mr. Harder himself was the absent unnamed owner, but Skip felt no need to mention it. He handed the check to Mr. Harder, Sr. "As an extra bonus," Skip said, "for the property owners, for their kind cooperation. This doesn't go into escrow, and it doesn't apply to the purchase price. Do you think it'll help their patience any?" Now Skip had ten thousand four hundred fifty dollars left of his original bankroll and owed the bank an astronomical amount of money.

"Oh," Mr. Harder, Sr., said. He laughed nervously, taken aback. "Well, hey . . ." He slid it into an inner breast pocket of

his jacket. "Thank you, Mr. Daniels," he said with dignity. He and Conrad left the office smiling. Skip shook hands with the remaining board members and left. Everybody was happy.

Ernie returned to work the next day in a wheelchair, defying his doctor's command to rest. Two hard-driving, back-breaking weeks passed, during which time the foundation was filled, the shell of the house was finished, the stucco was beginning to be applied, work on the fence circling the property (with electronic sensors in the gate and an intercom system) was completed, and the terra cotta roofing arrived. Drywallers and decorators swarmed the interior.

Best of all, the plumbers finished hooking up the septic system, which perked up the entire exhausted crew. Port-o-lets can become downright uncivilized when accommodating so many users.

But when the well was dug, and a pump rigged to provide a convenient on-site source of water for the men, the water tasted so odd that the men avoided it. Several of the crew worried about what Phantom would think of the taste, but Skip had no time to deal with it. He just resumed deliveries of bottled water and moved his

attention to other, more urgent, matters.

Summer arrived and the days warmed enough to become uncomfortable for the hard-working crews. One sweating plasterer was filling a thermos at the stand of icy bottled water when the skidding, gravel-flying arrival of Skip's truck startled him. He froze in astonishment as Skip sprinted towards him and knocked his thermos to the ground.

"Did you drink any of that water?" Skip shouted into the plasterer's face.

"Uh... no," he said. "Not yet."

"Who did?" Skip turned and screamed to the staring work crew scattered all over the large house, "Did any of you drink this water?"

It turned out that a few had. Skip called an ambulance, shouting instructions into his car phone. A few of the men began rubbing their bellies and grimacing. By the time the ambulance arrived, eight men were vomiting and needed no urging to go to the hospital. Skip drove the overflow from the crowded ambulance in his truck. He looked ten years older by the time they pulled up to St. Charles Hospital's emergency entrance.

The waiting attendants whisked the by now seriously

ailing men in to the doctors, who'd been warned and were standing by. Then Skip turned around and drove back to those waiting at the building site. They wanted some answers. So did he.

He pulled in right behind the homicide detective and the constable. The detective just gazed at Skip and shook his head. He sent a water sample in to the lab for immediate testing, taped up the remaining bottles, and left the constable in charge. After all, no one had died. Yet. This time.

Ernie, who was getting around on crutches now, sat down heavily on the hood of Skip's pickup truck. The men gathered around. A white-faced Skip stared at the bewildered men.

"How'd you know?" Ernie finally asked, voicing one of the main questions on everybody's mind. The other questions were who, how, and why, but not many of them really thought that Skip, whom they all liked, would know the answers.

Skip's pale lips moved before any words emerged. When they did come out, they sounded parched and shaken. "I visited the site this morning early, way before the rest of you were due. Took a drink. It felt odd in my stomach. Traveling with Phantom so much, you learn to rec-

ognize bad water . . . stuff like that. Made myself throw it up. Figured you guys didn't need to get sick, too—came as fast as I . . ." He was unable to finish. He swallowed hard. It'd taken him the entire drive from his house to the property to dream up that explanation.

He looked around him. The men seemed convinced. Before they moved back towards their unfinished work, a few punched him sympathetically in the bicep, which brought a choked feeling to Skip's throat that had nothing to do with dust.

Just then, the constable ambled over towards Skip and Ernie, a troubled look on his face. "Got it over the car radio. The lab nailed it soon enough to save the guys, thank God . . . sodium triouroacetate."

"Uh, what?" asked Skip.

"Pest control. Rat killer. Used to call it Tri-Zan. All the waterfront industries used it to control the rat population back in the early fifties, until it got banned," said the constable. "Pathologist said they hadn't seen the stuff in decades. But with the location, and the symptoms, an old guy in the lab thought of it right away. Lucky he did."

Ernie explained to Skip, "This used to be a big ship-building region. Where there's

water and ships, there's rats. I remember now that the stuff damn near killed off the whole town, years ago. Real disaster. Takes just a tiny bit . . ."

The constable nodded. "You probably saved the lives of every one of those guys who drank any. Odorless, and practically tasteless."

Involuntarily, the three of them looked up at the sun nearly directly above them. It would be noon in less than an hour, and the air palpitated with heat. Everyone would have taken some water at one time or another.

"My God. My God." Skip sat down hard on the hood next to Ernie, his eyes huge with horror. After a few moments, he stood up again. "Send 'em all home, Ernie."

Ernie struggled to his feet, fumbled for his crutches. "What?"

"You heard it, send 'em home. Now. Stop the work."

"You can't do that, we got a killer schedule as it is. We can't lose—"

Just then a caravan of cars pulled in behind Skip's truck, led by the battered Chevrolet driven by the homicide detective. Doors slammed, and a crowd of people bustled towards them, joined, Skip was startled to see, by the witch, who walked briskly in from the

fringe of trees that separated her property from Phantom's. He waited uneasily. Had they all figured it out? Was his cover blown? The crew, seeing the new arrivals, stopped work again and drifted curiously towards Ernie and Skip.

Ernie had his crutches under control now, and he stood at Skip's side. The men gathered behind Ernie. To Skip's surprise, at the witch's arrival, Ernie tripped his hat to her like a guy in an old movie. "Ma'am," he heard Ernie murmur to her. She nodded back, rewarding Ernie with a wry smile, but said nothing.

Mr. Arsdale, the banker, who was at the front of the crowd with the detective, started barking at Skip like a nervous terrier: "We heard about the ruckus up at the hospital from Dr. Villas. He said mass murder was taking place here. We won't—" The detective stopped Mr. Arsdale with a pained look and an upraised palm. The banker subsided immediately, but cast round-eyed appeals among the other trustees for support. He didn't get any.

The mayor and every village trustee except Dr. Villas were present, plus some others Skip didn't know.

Now the homicide detective asked in a polite, but firm, manner how "Mark" had come

to the conclusion ahead of everybody else that the bottled water was poisoned. The group hovered close, anxious to hear. Skip repeated his story.

When he finished, the mayor led the shouted protests to the detective that Mark's explanation was a good one, made sense, and didn't he think—the detective interrupted the mayor's suggestion about what to think and said, "We're going to have to close down the activity here until some explanation is found for this water contamination."

"Yes," said Ms. Bellwood, the bookstore lady, her gentle voice unusually sharp in her vehemence. "Lives are worth more than any amount of financial benefit. We must stop this . . . this . . ." She halted, speechless with anxiety.

"You got it," said Skip in a flat voice. She exhaled and smiled gratefully at him.

Some people were unhappy to hear that. Many in the crowd shrieked at the detective, explaining to him why it was a bad idea. The detective remained as polite, but as firm, as before.

"We can't afford—" bellowed the mayor.

"We can't afford to risk any more lives," interrupted the detective. "I'm considering this poisoning intentional until I

find out different. If a man hadn't already lost his life here, and Ernie nearly lost his leg, it'd be a little different. But as it stands—"

The clamor was deafening.

"We're willing to work," shouted a few of the sub-contractors, earning Skip's gratitude but increasing his anxiety.

"We're not idiots, we just won't—" began Ernie.

"Won't do what? Could you have predicted that animal trap? The rifle bullet?" The detective looked at the crew with compassion. He knew that many of them hadn't had work for months. This project was invaluable to them. To the whole village. He sighed. "I know it's hard, but surely you can see that the men here are endangered. Until we find out what that danger is, they've got to stay away."

Ernie subsided but looked frustrated.

"But they're working to a deadline," wailed Mr. Harder, Sr., flushed with the heat in his three-piece suit.

The detective shot him an uncomplimentary look without bothering to answer.

"I think," began Mr. Drexel, immediately reducing everyone to respectful attention, "I think that the detective's right, Mayor Harper. I think we can do no less for these men. I'm

sure this Phantom will understand. He seems to be a compassionate enough fellow, doing all these benefits."

Mrs. Risk suddenly spoke, startling everyone. They'd nearly forgotten she was there. "I believe Mr. Drexel expresses a valid observation about Phantom. In addition, Detective Hahn has the authority to enforce his request, unless I'm mistaken. He's being gracious, but I don't think you're actually being given a choice. Am I correct, Michael?"

The detective nodded. "That's the way it is, folks. The lady's right. Break it up now. You men get your gear together. I know you'll want your tools in case you get another job, and I'm going to inspect everything taken from the site."

"Jeeze," muttered Ernie's assistant, but he began collecting tools.

The crowd climbed back into their cars, murmuring among themselves, wondering what was going to happen and how long the holdup would last. Detective Michael Hahn turned to thank the witch for her help but discovered she'd already gone.

Skip was deeply relieved at the detective's action. He walked slowly over to the deck that hung over the beach, then stood there gazing back at the

unfinished house. His plans were in shambles. He needed to think. For no reason he could explain, he turned and looked to the east.

As if she were an apparition conjured by his thoughts, a young woman with wildly curling long dark hair stepped up onto the deck, startling him so completely by her sudden appearance that he was forced to clutch at the deck's railing to keep from falling backwards. While the thumping of his heart subsided, he stared, taking in the lush figure barely confined by the white silk shirt, tight jeans, and slim leather cowboy boots she wore.

"She sent me to fetch you," the apparition announced.

"Uh—who?"

She shifted impatiently. "Mrs. Risk." At Skip's continued blank look, she added, with a roll of large, lovely eyes, "The witch."

Skip blinked at her. Sighing with exasperation, she grabbed his hand and pulled gently. "C'mon," she said, as if to a small child. He came.

The young woman, who'd been introduced to Skip merely as "Rachel," settled the tray of drinks on a low, highly polished tree stump and handed Skip his beer.

"The letter told me about the poisoned water," Skip said as he accepted the tall, frosted glass. He wiped perspiration from his forehead with his arm and continued staring down at the grass on which he sat, remembering. The surrounding trees rustled in the breeze as if they were whispering about the situation.

Mrs. Risk crossed long legs, draping her gauzy black skirt in graceful folds across them. She poured herself and Rachel glasses of glittering gold wine, cradled hers in both hands, and leaned back in the rope hammock to listen. Rachel pulled an old aluminum lawn chair closer to Skip and sat.

"And because the other letters had been—been accurate, I drove like a maniac out to the site and, as you know, was just in time to stop the—the . . ." He seemed unable to go on.

"The carnage, so to speak," she finished for him.

Rachel made a small unidentifiable noise.

He nodded, his eyes sick with memory.

"Please relax, Mr. Daniels. You've averted a tragedy. Also, your anonymous letter writer demanded that you stop all work, and you have, so you've no reason to expect further atrocities. Isn't that correct?"

Skip nodded again.

"The letters—tell me about them. Were they typed? Were they mailed from Wyndham? That sort of detail might tell us a great deal."

Skip shrugged. "I never noticed. They were sent to me at a post office box I hired. Just about everybody in Wyndham has the address. But here's the one about the water." He pulled a much folded envelope out of his back jeans pocket. "You can have it, if you want. They were all just like that one, I think. I threw the others in the trash."

She took it from him and examined the grubby wadded paper. "So much for television detective shows teaching fingerprint and forensic technologies," she said, sighing as she unfolded it.

"The first one came the day after I agreed to buy the property. Said if I didn't want 'death and disaster,' I had to leave that parcel of land alone. Buy someplace else. I didn't pay attention, you know? Figured it was some nut getting his kicks. I got a second one, same message, and pitched it, too. Then right after the next one, that warned he was gonna hurt somebody, the carpenter was shot. I thought of this guy first thing, but the cops said it was likely an accident. I got kinda jumpy then, but the cops were so convincing . . .

"Then another one came. And Ernie got it in the leg. He coulda lost the whole leg, did you know that?"

Rachel blurted heatedly, "His leg? He could have been killed! What if he, or someone else, had been trapped when nobody else was around to rescue him? He might've bled to death."

Skip blinked hard, and finding himself unable to reply, took a drink of his beer. He was startled to notice that the witch was barefooted. Her feet were smooth, slim, and tanned a golden brown.

The breeze from the water caressed and cooled his skin. Reluctantly he disturbed the peace of the grove. "And, ma'am . . ."

Mrs. Risk looked up.

"I've got something else to tell you. My name isn't Mark Daniels."

Her eyebrows lifted, but her eyes looked unsurprised. "No?"

With a sigh dredged from the bottom of his workshoes, Skip told her the whole story, from Alexia to the present.

"Well," was all she said, at the end. She smiled faintly. Skip had been expecting something a little stronger. Like a demand for a jail sentence.

"You're quite an interesting young man."

Skip was shocked. That didn't seem an appropriate thing for a lady like her to say on hearing how he was doing something illegal.

"Tell me, ah—Skip. Have you ever asked your young woman whether she expects to be supported in a life of luxury?"

"Not exactly."

"How 'exactly'?"

Skip flushed. "Not at all."

"Then it must be that you are merely aware of the low character of this young woman." She gazed at him inquiringly.

Skip's head jerked back as if he'd been slapped. "No way! She's the kindest, sweetest, most unselfish, hardworking, loving—"

"On the contrary. She must be an incredibly selfish, self-serving, materialistic female to demand such monetary standards from a possible future spouse."

Skip roared, "But she didn't demand them. She's happy the way things are now. It's me that—" He stopped, looked dizzy. "Oh." His voice lowered to a whisper. "It's all me, isn't it?"

"So you've developed this driving need for wealth all by yourself?"

"I guess so." Skip's lips moved, but nothing more came out.

Mrs. Risk watched him, emotions flashing across her obsidian eyes that could only be guessed by the softness of the smile on her lips. Her eyes narrowed. "And, in your mind, has your goal justified the ensuing problems?"

Skip stirred himself, then paled. "If by that you mean the carpenter getting killed, of course not. Or Ernie's leg, or the guys getting poisoned, either. No way," he finished with firmness. His features melted into a picture of misery. "I've been really stupid. And look at all the trouble I've caused."

He sank back onto his elbows in the grass and pushed away his unfinished beer. "What'll I do now?" But before Mrs. Risk could reply, he answered himself. "Turn myself in, that's what I'll do. I don't deserve Alexia now. Less than I ever did."

"I don't believe so. If anything, you probably deserve her more now than you did before. No, I think we need to consider this problem from a different point of view than merely punishing you for idiocy. You appear to have a thriving conscience, so you've probably suffered enough anyway."

Skip looked astonished at this. She leaned farther back in her hammock, swayed, sipped at her wine, and considered the

leaves fluttering far above her head. "Yes, another point of view," she repeated.

They sat in silence for a while, during which time Skip glanced at Rachel with a wary eye. At some point in the discussion she'd slumped in her chair and swung one leg over its arm. In this pastoral setting, she looked to Skip alarmingly glorious, like a temporarily benign exotic plant that carried poison in its fingernails.

"Are you her daughter?" he ventured. She laughed uproariously at this, but only shook her head.

He abandoned his curiosity and returned his attention to the witch. "If you don't mind my asking, ma'am, what point of view are you talking about? Maybe I could help you think if I knew."

Mrs. Risk considered him. "Murder's been committed, Skip. And other murders have been attempted. An obviously desperate unknown person is stopping at nothing to keep you—or people in general—away from that piece of property. Someone who has no conscience, Skip. Every—single—one of you could have died.

"I don't usually involve myself in police matters, but in view of the seriousness of these events, and the suspicion that

would inevitably be cast upon you..." She looked down at him. Her angular face could have been chiseled from ancient but living stone. The merciless intent he saw there caused a shiver to race down Skip's backbone.

"We must find that someone, don't you think?" she finished.

"Damn right," Skip said. "But how?"

"You're willing to help?"

"I ought to, don't you think? I owe it all to those guys who nearly died because of me. And the one who did."

"Get that thought out of your mind this instant, Skip," Mrs. Risk said sharply. "You didn't kill that man, or try to kill the others. At this point, the worst you've accomplished was to give them jobs they badly needed, although," her mouth twisted wryly, "in a highly creative way. Anyone interested in that property could have triggered these same events. No, someone evil is at work here. Someone with no conscience. Someone whom I intend to block from achieving his depraved goal. First of all, will you do what I say?"

"Anything. Just tell me."

"Your part will be to get your men together and let it be known all over town that you're continuing. You've got to finish building that house. That's im-

perative. Let me speak to Michael, I'll arrange it. We won't proceed entirely without police sanction."

The color drained from Skip's face. "I can't. The men'll be hurt. Maybe killed."

"No, they won't. Can you believe me when I say that I wouldn't do anything to jeopardize anyone? Besides, our obliging murderer seems fond of sending you warning notes before taking any action. I doubt he'll change his habits now."

"That makes sense," said Skip in a faint voice. He studied her face—the sharp cheekbones, the glittering black eyes. Looking at her, he found it easy to believe she was a witch. And Rachel sitting close by had that same look of . . . of power. He felt the force of both women's personalities as if they were live things separate from the women themselves.

He didn't know whether she was or wasn't a witch, or even what a witch was, but he decided to trust her. Why he felt that way, he couldn't say. But he did.

"Okay." He got to his feet. "Anything else?"

She smiled at his sudden capitulation. Then her smile turned grim. "I'll let you know."

He wrote down for her his post office box number, his real

home address, and his car phone number, and then left to do as she'd instructed.

By noon the next day, Skip had the homicide detective's permission and the men were back at work, nervous but happy to be earning again. Skip had new, sealed, bottled water trucked in.

For her part, Mrs. Risk wasted no time in surveying the property from all sides to see if she could spot what had set this particular piece of land apart from all others in the murderer's mind.

She visited the sprawling property that bordered the west of Phantom's lot—a shuttered summer residence. The caretaker, interrupted at lunch in his small house on a corner of the property, confirmed what she already knew of the history of the place and his duties, which were few, judging by the seedy condition of the place. She gave him some terse advice about neglected upkeep and left.

A half-mile farther west, the water scooped inland between two jutting fingers of protective land, forming Wyndham's sheltered port. The village's one big industry, North Shore Industries Corporation, occupied the harbor side of the eastern finger of land. Although situated on the water, NSIC was dis-

creetly tucked back behind some shielding pines and shared the port with a public dock for pleasure boaters; Wyndham's only large hotel and restaurant establishment, Harrington's; and other, smaller enterprises. The focus of Wyndham's village life and its tourist attractions centered on the port area.

The port provided a convenient access for small tankers to offload heating oil and gas at NSIC, which stored the oil and gas before selling it to all Long Island.

Mrs. Risk remembered how NSIC's docks and extensive storage facilities had once been an ill-kept eyesore, spoiling the beautiful coastline and fouling the water until the company changed hands ten years ago. The new owner, Aisa Garrett, had proceeded not only to repair and update North Shore's facility and operations, but also to rectify the damage done to the coastline. He'd exceeded both environmental standards and the aesthetic hopes of the tourist-dependent community. His stockholders had screamed, but Mr. Garrett had persevered, serenely oblivious to their protests. Now NSIC's taxes almost singlehandedly supported Wyndham's excellent school and cultural assets.

Mr. Garrett was a beloved man in the village.

Not so beloved was Mr. Drexel, the Village Board trustee and acknowledged heir of the widowed and childless Aisa Garrett. Because of Aisa's renown, however, he enjoyed the status of near-royalty in the village. A high society maven and aspiring jet-setter, he made no secret of his opinion of Wyndham as provincial and boring compared to the urban delights available to a man of his stature in Manhattan. Because of his pompous, superior airs, he'd been despised by the villagers in the beginning, but time and familiarity, plus the miracles he'd achieved in carrying out Aisa's cleanup of NSIC, had brought tolerance on both sides.

Mrs. Risk gazed across the now pleasant vista of North Shore Industries Corporation as she recalled its history.

She returned to her own property. Skip would've been astonished to see her don a three-eighths inch thick full wet suit. The water in the Sound was cold even at the warmest time of year, however, and the insulation was necessary. She slid into the water and maneuvered herself into a buoyancy control vest and a small compressed-air tank, then skillfully submerged, in-

tent on examining the coast of Skip's property from underwater. *Something* had to be unique about this property, and she was determined to find out what that could be.

After nearly an hour's close examination of the beach's edge bordering Phantom's land, the only feature of interest she discovered was a thermocline, an icy current of water within warmer water. She spotted it by the distortion it caused to her vision, much like the shimmering image gasoline vapors make when rising from a hot pavement. It flowed perversely, against the current, flush against a shelf of land, emerging from a crevasse a few feet below the water's surface.

As she drifted, only shallowly submerged, she pulled the scuba regulator out of her mouth. She pushed her face into the chill flow and tasted it. Not the foul-water taste of Phantom's well. No, and not only that, it wasn't salty, either. It was pure, fresh water rushing fiercely through the saltwater Sound, an underwater spring escaping from somewhere beneath Phantom's back lawn.

The spring would provide a delightful alternative to the fouled well water for whoever lived on the land someday. When the killing stopped.

The spring made the property more desirable, and solved Phantom's water problem, but as a motive for murder, it hardly qualified.

She took a sample for testing anyway. When she gave it to Rachel so she could take it to a lab, she added a sample of the well water, to be thorough.

After that, she dressed carefully in her best clothes. Aisa Garrett was an old friend of hers, and unfailingly delighted to be imposed upon. She began walking down the beach towards North Shore Industries. It was time to impose.

“You're looking handsome, Aisa,” said Mrs. Risk with a slow smile.

“For a seventy-one-year-old, you mean. Yes, I'm sure I do, underneath all these wrinkles. How perceptive of you to notice.” He leaned forward in his desk chair and grinned up at her mischievously from beneath grizzled eyebrows.

“Would you like some wine?” he asked. “I recently laid in some vintages that might interest you, although my doctor has restricted me to two pitchers a day of that boring stuff there.” He flapped a disdainful hand at a carafe of water on his desk.

The witch laughed and shook her head. "My condolences. Not now, thank you."

He patted her smooth brown fingers with a hand that was gnarled with arthritis and freckled from spending long sunny afternoons fishing, an addiction he was able to indulge because of Matthew Drexel's efficiency. Drexel ran the place smoothly under Aisa's blissfully semiretired supervision, which explained why Aisa always had time for Mrs. Risk's impositions.

"I know you never visit without a reason, so let's get what I can do for you out of the way so we can socialize, my dear."

"For what will you permit me to ask, Aisa?" She perched familiarly on the edge of his desk.

"Anything your heart desires; I'm too old to worry about the consequences. Now you've got me breathless with anticipation. What new trouble are you stirring up?"

"As you yourself mentioned, you've reached the age of seventy-one. How high a price would you pay to live somewhat longer? I'm here to save your life, Aisa."

"Again?" At first he chuckled, then he examined her expression and sighed.

Soon, NSIC's resident corporate lawyer scurried into Aisa Garrett's office, whisking past

Mr. Garrett's astonished personal secretary without troubling to be announced. Then the presence of the secretary herself was demanded. The secretary, a good-hearted, loyal woman, rushed to obey.

It was some time before Mrs. Risk emerged from the administrative offices, but when she did, she looked contented. She promised to return to sample Aisa's wine at a not too distant date in the future and left. The whole event was a matter of some speculation among the outer office staff but was totally forgotten after the next Thursday evening. Because on Thursday night, Mr. Garrett died.

Those who remembered the witch's close friendship with the old man and who might have attempted to console her were kept at bay by a new, enraged aspect of her solitude. She seemed to have tucked her grief deep within herself as she grimly pursued her inquiries.

The entire village mourned. Mr. Drexel was now considered by the village—although unofficially, until the formal reading of the will—to be the new majority stockholder, president, CEO, and chairman of North Shore Industries Corporation. As a result, he became too busy to bother about the rock star's house any further.

The rest of the village trustees understood and carried on without him.

On-site, Skip remained oblivious to everything but the completion of the house. Feverish with anxiety, he worked side by side with Ernie's men, surprising them with his expertise, keeping an eye on possible dangers, and at the same time hastening the project to its end. He couldn't wait for it to be finished. The whole scheme seemed to stretch somehow into a surrealistically endless time frame, like a nightmare.

But days were crossed off the calendar and work was accomplished at record speed. Occasionally, Skip raised his eyes from some task to see the witch strolling purposefully across the beach or road, but although he worked on-site from pre-dawn until long after sundown, she never visited him. He was curious about her activities and their results, but a reluctance to discuss the matter kept him from going to her house and asking.

It didn't matter: the only fact she might've told him was that the lab tests had revealed no surprises and would easily solve a pesky problem for the new owner: the spring contained pure, clean water. The well water was polluted with natural gas, which simply con-

firmed the good sense of the men in avoiding drinking it.

Only a daily ritual of visiting his post office box immediately after the noon delivery broke his concentration on building the house. His breath would stick in his chest until he twisted the key in the small door, opened it, thrust in a hand to search for that certain envelope which he would know by touch alone—and he would breathe again. Another twenty-four hours had passed without word from the anonymous letter writer, and Skip could go back to work.

Finally the last nail was driven home and stuccoed over. The moment had arrived for the next step in Skip's plan.

After first checking in with the witch, Skip summoned Conrad to meet him for lunch at Harrington's on the waterfront. Once there, Skip handed over a notarized list of items, complete with appraisals, that would be installed in Phantom's house the next day (the result of several nights' research, catalogue photocopying, and forgery on Skip's part).

Phantom's possessions were too valuable to spend a second unguarded and unsecured, Skip told Conrad. The house and its pending contents needed legal protection, even though the papers remained

unsigned and technically the property and house were both still unpurchased. It wasn't Phantom's way of working to allow anything to chance. Everything must be insured, from the merest tack to the most priceless piece of art.

After an astonished pause, Conrad opened his mouth to say only he knew what, because Skip stopped him with an upraised palm and the words, "Phantom insists." Conrad's mouth snapped shut, and he hastened to comply. Within hours, Skip returned to the witch's house with the signed documents. He hardly cared. The only document he was really anxious over hadn't so far appeared . . . a new anonymous letter from the murderer warning him of some fresh disaster.

That night a sixteen-wheeler arrived and disturbed the peace of Mrs. Risk, who was the only human being within earshot of the commotion, their two properties being in an isolated part of town. From her bed she listened to the racket and shouting that informed her that Phantom's "possessions" were being moved into his future home. She smiled grimly to herself. She wished she could be sure that what she was hearing was the trap closing around her quarry. She spent the rest of the night thinking.

The next day, bright and early, Skip did the rounds of the village employment spots. By midafternoon he'd hired a cook, an assistant cook, gardeners, groundskeepers, a gatekeeper, a mechanic, handymen, and three sisters to keep house for Phantom. They were to report for work tomorrow at eight A.M., in time to look the place over and sort things out in preparation for Phantom's early evening arrival on that same day. They were to be sure to arrive exactly at eight, so he wouldn't have to spend precious time manning the electrified gate until the gatekeeper he'd hired showed up. Everyone promised.

Then Skip ordered food, household goods, and flowers from the specialty shops, delis, and gourmet grocers, to be delivered an hour after his new staff arrived tomorrow. This required the use of his remaining store of cash.

Now he was broke.

While these transactions were taking place, excitement spread like unquarantined measles until the entire village lost their collective reason and abandoned their shops and businesses. Who could work in an atmosphere of such delirium? Singlehandedly, Phantom had practically wiped out Wyndham's recession. The

mayor strolled Main Street chatting and shaking voters' hands in case someone forgot whom to credit for this bonanza, and the trustees spent the remaining daylight admonishing the villagers to keep their "secret."

As dark set in, Skip locked himself inside Phantom's house to brood, convinced hell had arrived at Wyndham-by-the-Sea and he had brought it.

Mrs. Risk also remained indoors, at her own house, in case any of the villagers, deprived of a glimpse of Phantom's sprawling stucco mansion by the enormous fence surrounding it, decided to see how a witch lived.

The sun sank in the west, spreading a hazy rose benediction over the hysterical villagers, who simmered impatiently in their homes, waiting for Phantom's impending arrival. Eventually the last bedroom light was extinguished, and everyone slept . . . or pretended to.

Around three in the morning, in the peaceful wooded coastline east of NSIC, an arm of flame reached for the moon. Phantom's house was on fire. By the time a patrolling constable spotted the blaze and the volunteer fire department assembled themselves, the fire had become all-encompassing.

The electric gate must have jammed when the control box caught fire; it had to be forced open. Although the volunteers battered at the iron latches until they broke, it was too late to save anything by the time the trucks rolled up to the house. The hot, dry weather had primed the newly constructed building and everything around it to tinder perfection. Nothing was spared.

The commotion pulled the villagers out of their beds, and by dawn the entire population stood appalled at the sodden, smoldering mass. Their hopes, their dreams, their glorious future in providing a secret home for Phantom were no more.

Mark Daniels, everyone agreed afterwards, showed what a selfless, heroic human being he was both during and after the disaster. While the finished product of incredible organization, weeks of work, and probably millions of dollars' worth of goods went up in a miserable puff of smoke, his main concern was that no one got hurt. While priceless works of art were being reduced to ash, he had patrolled the property, keeping rubberneckers clear of falling debris and smoke.

Yes, Mark had a heart of gold. Of course, these admiring comments began circulating

right after he announced that everything was insured to the hilt, so there would be plenty of money to reimburse everyone for the slightest effort made on Phantom's behalf. Everyone would be paid in full for everything, regardless of the disaster.

A rush was made to fax Phantom the news about the current status of his home-to-be. He was advised to divert his path from Wyndham, since they were no longer ready to receive him. A reply, received later, was read aloud by Skip to those assembled—crammed—into the Town Hall at four on the afternoon of the fire. When he added that Phantom would be checking into a prominent Los Angeles hospital for his rest, it nearly broke the listeners' hearts. "We'll rebuild this house!" shouted someone. "Better than ever! Fireproof!" cried others.

Then Skip tactfully informed the villagers that Phantom would never be coming to Wyndham. The loss of his beloved possessions was too bitter a memory to face. The listeners became teary-eyed and a few in the back of the room sobbed openly. The Village Board trustees stared at each other in dismay. Years of prosperity, up in smoke.

Just as people were beginning to stir, to console each other with reminders of how many had benefited from Phantom over the last weeks, a reporter from the local paper, Mr. Scott Bade, strode into the crowded hall.

Instead of joining in the general mood of mourning, Scott snatched a chair from the mayor's platform and stood on it, waving his arms for attention. Cupping his hands around his mouth, he announced that the name of the heir to Aisa Garrett's company, North Shore Industries Corporation, had just been made public by the corporation's lawyer. As some listeners loudly questioned "why bring that up now?" the reporter continued: "The heir, folks, the *heir!* Instead of Mr. Matthew Drexel—it's Ms. Peggy Marcastle, personal secretary and executive assistant of Aisa Garrett. She now owns all of Mr. Garrett's assets, including controlling shares of stock in NSIC, which pretty much makes her the owner of North Shore Industries Corporation!" Scott surveyed the packed room in satisfaction as every man and woman there froze in shocked silence.

When he judged they'd absorbed that bit of news, he blurted, "And not just that, folks! Mr. Matthew Drexel, *for-*

mer executive vice president of North Shore Industries, is to be arrested shortly for the murder of Aisa Garrett." Seemingly unconcerned, or maybe just ignoring the fact that the possibly slandered Drexel was at this moment standing up on Mayor Harper's platform next to the mayor, he continued, "Detectives from the Sixth Precinct Homicide Department will be making their arrest based on the evidence found in Aisa Garrett's body during an autopsy."

"This poison, identified as Tri-Zan, is the same stuff that poisoned Mr. Daniels' construction crew at Phantom's house. Mr. Drexel had access to the poison, which was banned from Long Island after World War II, by having been put in charge of ridding NSIC of its old supply of Tri-Zan ten years ago during NSIC's cleanup campaign, which many here will remember. A stash of it was found in his private office for which he will be asked to account."

And with that, Scott jumped down from his perch, beaming at the stunned villagers. Only a few noticed the "okay" sign he flashed with his thumb and fingers to someone at the back of the room.

Then, breaking this silence, came a loud, high-pitched anguished, "Noooooo!" To the mayor's astonishment, this un-

dignified yelp had come from the mouth of Mr. Drexel. Mr. Drexel leaped from the mayor's platform. He forged a path through the tightly packed people with his fists, propelled by furious energy.

Those standing near Ms. Marcastle at the back of the room, unaware of the goal of Mr. Drexel's journey, turned to congratulate her. For the moment, however, Ms. Marcastle seemed unable to offer a coherent thank you since her mouth had dropped open at the announcement of Mr. Garrett's new heir—herself!—and was still sagging in that position from the idea that her beloved Mr. Garrett had been murdered.

Suddenly Mr. Drexel reached her side and lunged, with flexing fingers, towards her throat. Ms. Marcastle's dazed fumble for escape was prevented by the mass of villagers packed into the room. Observers began to scream.

At that moment Mrs. Risk appeared between Mr. Drexel and Ms. Marcastle and effectively blocked his progress with her body. Nobody remembered seeing the witch nearby a moment ago, which many took as confirmation of their opinion that she was truly supernatural.

Then Mrs. Risk spoke. Her low vibrant voice cut through the mayhem and silenced it.

"So you've discovered all your plans to be fruitless, have you, Matthew?"

Mr. Drexel was brought up short by the question. Slowly his hands lowered, as if his earlier manic energy was being drained from him. His face reflected an agonized bewilderment. He blinked at the witch, then looked around him, although without any apparent awareness of his audience.

"I don't understand," he said to her in a peculiarly high-pitched tone. "Wasn't he already buried? I went to the funeral myself. When did they do an autopsy?"

Homicide Detective Michael Hahn reached him at just that moment and with a heavy hand, pushed him none too gently by the shoulder into a chair. Detective Hahn aimed a commanding frown at the surrounding onlookers, and most of them shuffled back a foot or so.

Mrs. Risk, however, stayed close beside Mr. Drexel. Her eyes flashed with a black fire, but her voice sounded only detached . . . casual . . . as if she merely wondered about some things.

"Aisa's doctor ordered him to drink two carafes of water ev-

ery day and you knew it. You added Tri-Zan to the carafe on his desk that Peggy kept filled with water for him. You're the one who slipped that same Tri-Zan into the bottled water to poison Phantom's construction crew, too, aren't you." She didn't make it sound like a question.

He gave a short, bitter laugh. "When Aisa took over, he found that North Shore still had a supply of the banned rat poison left over from decades ago. He put me in charge of disposing of it, along with everything else. I never got around to it. I could use all I wanted and nobody would miss it, since nobody was supposed to still have any."

"But the well water would've made the crew sick eventually, that was the joke, wasn't it, Matthew?" she said.

Mr. Drexel looked aside but nodded.

"Because it was tainted with gas," said Mrs. Risk. "The water table was slowly being polluted from those pipeline leaks you were supposed to clean up and eliminate years ago. You never finished that job, either, did you?"

"I started it, but the costs were astronomical. The pipes were so old—the engineers said they had pinhole leaks, maybe even only one or two, that we couldn't find. The only solution

they recommended was to dig up and replace the entire pipeline. I did replace some of it, but there were *miles* of pipes!"

"And since you were in charge, you were able to keep anyone at the company from knowing all the facts of the cleanup operation, weren't you? Nobody but you knew that you'd left it unfinished. And so, slowly, gas has continued to leak into the water table at the east end of the village. The leak hadn't spread to my property yet, and the only people living between NSIC and Phantom's property are rarely there to notice anything. The plots are so large on my side of town it played to your advantage, isn't that right, Matthew?"

"I would've done the job, in time." His voice sounded plaintive, as if he felt she should see the reasonableness of his actions. He looked up at her. "The gas was taking years to spread. But no, Mr. Garrett wanted everything done immediately. NSIC would've gone broke."

"Not broke, but the stock price would've been greatly depressed, wouldn't it, Matthew?" murmured Mrs. Risk.

He nodded, still looking only at her. "The stock price had already dropped in reaction to Aisa's huge expenditures. I'd gotten several loans using that stock as collateral. If the value

dropped again, I would've had to come up with money I didn't have to back up those loans. It's expensive, living the way I do. Everybody knows I'm Aisa's heir. I'm an important man, I have appearances to maintain."

Mrs. Risk looked away from him for a moment, the muscles in her jaw working, then continued, "Too bad you couldn't have—economized your lifestyle a little—enough to buy that land yourself." She still spoke with a strange intensity of tone that carried throughout the room without being loud. The crowd stood breathlessly silent, listening.

"Purchasing the land yourself would've bought you more time—time you needed to wait for Aisa's death. Because when Aisa died, your inheritance would not have just paid off your personal debts. You could've discreetly replaced the pipelines and still maintained your lifestyle . . . maintained your—your rightful position in the village, and in the Manhattan society of which you're so fond.

"But instead," she continued, "you were greedy. In order to stop construction, you chose to kill the poor carpenter. When the police decided the murder was an accident, work on the project continued. Then you

were driven to kill someone else, but this time you merely broke the leg of the construction boss. Nothing seemed to go your way. Nobody would stop working on that house. Mark never publicized your anonymous letters, either, which might have stopped things. You must have been horribly frustrated."

"I was," he said. "I was."

"Poisoning the water nearly brought you success . . . nearly. You didn't want to keep murdering people, but what else could you do, Matthew? What else could you do?"

Matthew Drexel let out a long, pent-up breath. "Everybody was frantic to get that house built, to have that rock star live here. I didn't care myself until they picked out that one piece of property. I just couldn't let it happen. But nobody would give in."

Then Matthew Drexel looked her quizzically in the eye. "How did you figure it out?"

"I found an underwater spring flowing through Phantom's property. It tasted good, which made me wonder why his well water tasted so bad. I had both waters tested. The water from the water table was polluted. Tainted with natural gas. Natural gas isn't found on Long Island, Matthew. NSIC has it brought in by ship, and

then they store it. Everyone knew whom Aisa trusted to carry out his wishes, his orders, for NSIC's cleanup. You, Matthew."

"Phantom's got money, more money than God," he said bitterly. "I knew when he tasted the lousy water he could afford to get experts in to fix it. And they'd figure out that NSIC had polluted the water table. And . . . and then everybody would find out everything."

"You mean Aisa Garrett would find out everything, don't you? And disinherit you?"

Mr. Drexel seemed to shrink as he sat there.

"But Aisa Garrett just kept getting older," said Mrs. Risk.

"That old man might've lived to be a hundred if . . . if he hadn't died just then," Mr. Drexel said petulantly.

"If you hadn't killed him."

An angry murmur spread through the people standing nearest Mr. Drexel. He seemed oblivious. Or uncaring. He looked exhausted. Beaten.

Detective Michael Hahn took a firm grip on his arm and pulled him up from the chair. They moved toward the door and the waiting patrol car just beyond.

"After Aisa's death," suddenly continued Mrs. Risk as if she'd just thought of something. The detective paused,

pulling Mr. Drexel up short. "Because you thought you'd soon inherit the company and the income to go with it, you no longer needed to prevent Phantom's arrival. Aisa's money would soon solve everything. The fire probably seemed to you to be a bonus. A huge stroke of luck."

Mr. Drexel brightened for a second, but the look faded. "That was lucky, yes. I thought I'd won everything. Everything," he repeated.

"But you didn't," stated Mrs. Risk flatly.

A spasm of anger flashed across his face. "No," he said shortly, and he turned away from her.

Detective Michael Hahn pulled his captive's arms together behind his back to handcuff him. The crowd sprang into angry life. The detective pushed Drexel before him, using broad shoulders to wedge their way through the enclosing mass. Despite the detective's best efforts, a few fists and feet found their way to Matthew's anatomy.

Then a high quavery voice interrupted the growing uproar from over the loudspeaker. It was Aisa Garrett. He was standing up on the mayor's platform being steadied by the mayor's grip on his elbow. He

looked frail, but he was certainly alive.

"Stop it now, everyone. Stop it," commanded Aisa Garrett. "He was more unsuccessful than you know, about murdering me, anyway."

The villagers, after gaping at this apparition of a dead man, cheered. "Aisa!" they shouted.

Aisa held up an arm and waved. "Listen," he croaked at them. Mayor Harper rapped on his table. "Listen—thank you, mayor—listen, folks. I want to tell you how much I regret letting this greedy son of a bitch get away with his... his scheme, but I swear I'll make it up to you all, as much as I can make it up to anybody. That carpenter's wife will be supported for life, and her kids are going to college." A few cheered, but mostly faces looked grave. Silence spread through the crowd.

"I know," Aisa said after a pause. "I agree with you. Money doesn't replace a husband and father. I agree with you all. I'll clean up the water thing, I'll be in charge of it myself this time." He sighed. "I guess I'll also be looking for somebody to take my place," he grimaced. "I'm getting too old to look after things if a trick like that can be played right under my nose. I'm more sorry than I can say." He lifted a

hand, turned, and then got lost in the milling agitated crowd.

Detective Hahn resumed charge of his prisoner's exit, and people shuffled away to mull over the many shocks they'd absorbed. Skip melted away from sight as if aided by a witch. Which he had been.

They made a mellow, subdued party under the trees, sipping Aisa Garrett's excellent red zinfandel—Aisa Garrett, Rachel, and Mrs. Risk... the witch... in painted aluminum lawn chairs. Ernie and Skip sat sprawled out in the grass.

"As agreed, I'll reimburse everybody for the debts incurred on—ah—Phantom's behalf, Skip," said Aisa. "Including the mortgage on the property. I guess I wouldn't mind moving next door to Mrs. Risk." He chuckled. "Maybe Ernie'll build me a house, whaddya think, Ernie? Fireproofed, though."

Ernie lifted a glass to Aisa and nodded.

Skip flushed. "I don't think it's right that you pay anything, Mr. Garrett."

"Don't be silly, Skip," said the witch sharply. "He's fulfilling his part of a bargain we made, one you know nothing about. You certainly couldn't pay, regardless. The gas leak, after all, was the root of the

problem. And Aisa's entirely correct to assume the liabilities acquired by not personally overseeing the cleanup to its completion. It was his error—and his responsibility. Taking care of the carpenter's widow isn't, but Aisa's a good man."

Aisa smiled at her for that. He patted Skip on the arm. "She'd figured out what Matthew was doing, and made a very shrewd guess as to what he planned to do next. Saved my life, bigod. It's just money, boy. But that's something you'll find out, I'm sure. Speaking of which, I don't want to be indelicate, but what was it exactly that *you* were going to get out of this?"

Ernie spoke up, surprising everyone. "My guess is, the insurance payoff. The house that burned down was probably full of nothing except Skip's imagination. If he'd actually taken out a *real* insurance policy, the amount would've come to a sizable bit more than the total debts Mark—uh, Skip... can't quite get used to that other name yet, sorry—that Skip owed after the fire."

"Yeah, Mr. Garrett. That's about it." Skip cast an anxious glance at the witch, but she added nothing.

"Instead, he loses his fifty grand," put in Rachel with a

grin. "But now he's so much *smarter*." She winked at Skip.

He smiled nervously back at her, then frowned. "Just who are you, anyway?"

She made a mocking face. "Oh, like you, just somebody who's in the process of being made *smarter*." She rolled her eyes and sighed. "Like, an apprentice 'witch.'" She grinned at him again. He looked at Mrs. Risk uncertainly, but she was busy refilling glasses.

"Oh ho." Aisa Garrett's bushy brows elevated as he finished some mental figuring. He nodded. "Would've been a nice return on your investment, boy. But you're lucky I was your 'insurance policy.' This lovely lady kept you from a sure jail sentence by preventing you from defrauding an insurance company."

"Yes, that was the one poorly conceived part of your plan, Skip," said the witch. "Insurance companies are notoriously curious about large claims. They would have conducted a thorough investigation and would have exposed your entire game."

"I'm surprised a sharp young boy like you wouldn't have known that," put in Aisa. "But give him some credit, my dear. Except for that one major blunder that would've destroyed his plan and changed his entire

life, he did pull off the rest of it with some panache, after all. He showed some sound technical thinking."

The witch gave an incredulous snort that sounded odd from her elegant nose.

Ernie stretched out on the grass and poured himself more wine. He was grinning to himself.

The witch prodded him with a toe. "What are you so complacent about? You're not going to broadcast the news about Skip's confidence trick all over the village, are you? He could still be arrested for attempting to defraud. At the very least, it could ruin his chances with his young woman. Why spoil a lesson well learned?"

"Me? Hell, no. Besides, the ones who'd believe me are the same ones who'd never speak to me again for busting their dreams of how close they got to being buddies with Phantom. Uh-uh. I was just thinking how right I was about *you* all along."

The witch tucked her bare feet under her black gauze dress and straightened her back. "In what way could that be, Mr. Block?"

"What I told Mark—Skip—here, about how great you are and how you give people a hand, was only half of what I always thought. You are one, excuse me, hell of a goodlookin'

woman who's as sharp as a tack and no fool, either. I can see why you get yourself up in black like that, scaring the be-jeezus outa the idiots in the area. You need some kinda protection, livin' way out here all alone like you do, fishing and lobstering for a living. Oh, I saw the pots and tackle, and the diving gear, too. No use pretending."

The witch looked at Aisa in alarm.

He chuckled. "That's wonderful. That's just wonderful. A fisherwoman!" Aisa's chuckles escalated into a wheezing howl. "God, I'm sorry, Ernie. It's just that—" He howled some more, helplessly.

Aisa wiped his eyes as he finally calmed down. "Well, that

was wonderful, as I say. But, my dear man, I regret to inform you that she most definitely does not fish for a living."

"What does she do then?" asked Skip, bewildered.

"None of your business," snapped the witch. Color was high on her sharp cheekbones.

Unfazed, Ernie stubbornly continued. "Well, I still say you are one hell of a woman. I'd give anything to be good enough for you, but frankly, ma'am, I'm not. And I don't know who is. If I do, I'll run him over your way, but until then, I claim the privilege of bein' at your service any time." He drank the rest of his wine in heady triumph.

The witch looked to the heavens and sighed. "Dear Lord," she said.

A Loaf of Bread, a Jug of Wine, and Sixty-four Megabytes of RAM

Robert Loy

Julia is the exception, but ordinarily I would much rather interact with computers than people. I know they're supposed to be complicated and complex, and I guess in a way they are. But they have this advantage over human beings: once you learn what makes a computer tick, you know forever what makes a computer tick. It won't change on you next week and start thinking and acting in totally different and incomprehensible ways like people do.

Especially female people. I like female people and everything, but I've just about given up on ever figuring them out. Part of the problem is I've never really been involved with one long enough to study how they process data and react and so forth. And part of the problem is that they're just not consistent like computers. Their basic input/output system is erratic.

My brother Marty now, he's just the opposite of me. He can't do much with a computer other than sing its praises, but he can talk to people all day long and never run out of cute and clever things to say. Maybe that's why our little two-man computer business is still thriving while most of the other independent little guys have either been bought out or bulldozed.

Our strengths complement each other is what I'm trying to say. I build the systems in the back while Marty sells the heck out of them up front. We have our own little brand name I'm sure you've never heard of, but everybody who has heard of it will tell you they are sweet machines. Then down the road Marty will either sell them a new faster upgraded model or I'll fix the one they've got. I'll even make housecalls, which is something I can guarantee Compaq won't do for you.

It was on a housecall that I met Julia. I've certainly never believed in love at first sight. Biologically and chemically speaking,

it just doesn't make sense. But if I didn't love Julia at first sight—and I'd be willing to swear that I did, or at first scent (she smelled incredible)—then I definitely loved her the first time I heard her laugh.

Julia works at a law office downtown, Fregosi, Walters and Fregosi. A law office that buys all their hardware, software, and peripherals from us. Julia's internal modem went on the blink and it was throwing off the whole network, so I hopped in my Hyundai and headed downtown.

Usually people don't hang around when I'm working on their system. They go and drink coffee or smoke cigarettes or gossip with some co-worker whose computer is still working. Once in a while someone will stay and try to carry on a conversation with me, but like I said, sparkling repartee is not what I do best. I'm pretty clever, I think, I'm just not quick. In fact, I have a tendency to stutter when I'm nervous, and I am always nervous around women. At night after I go home to bed I can think of all kinds of witty and charming things I *should* have said. But in the spotlight like that, my brain freezes up like a computer trying to boot up with a non-system disk.

Julia wasn't there when I started working on her machine. I was screwing the rear cover back on—I had opened her up just to check everything out, but it wasn't actually a hardware problem, just a couple of characters missing in her initialization string—when the cubicle was filled with the sound of high heels and the smell of expensive perfume.

When I turned to see who it was who smelled like that, I saw the woman I've fantasized about on the rare occasions when I've allowed myself to fantasize about ever actually finding a woman to love and understand. She had dark hair that hugged her shoulders, deep brown eyes, and a long slender neck with a pretty little mole just under her jawline.

"Forget it," she said, and for one horrifying moment I thought she'd caught me looking at her chest. But no, she was talking about the computer. "It's finito. Kaput. If it was a horse, I probably wouldn't shoot it, but I'd sure geld him so he couldn't reproduce and make any more little high-tech pains in the ass."

"Uh... well, it's... I m-mean, there's n-n-nothing... that is..." For some reason people who look like they were real popular and successful in high school are the hardest of all for me to try and talk to. Julia was obviously head cheerleader, homecoming



ONLY THESE COPS DIDN'T HAVE NOTEBOOKS AND SKETCHPADS.
THEY HAD HANDCUFFS.

queen, National Honor society member, president of the student government, the whole nine yards.

I was trying to tell her that it was only a minor problem and that as a matter of fact it was already fixed, but as usual the link between my brain and my tongue was faulty. I couldn't get the words to come out just one at a time, much less arrange them into any order that might be considered entertaining, or even informative.

But I'll tell you, I was already looking forward to that evening when I'd be at home alone, and then I'd think of something Cary Grant suave or Clark Gable cool that would charm this goddess.

Even if I could have thought of something right then and there, it wouldn't have done me much good because she was off doing something else anyway and not listening to me. She had a good-sized trophy of a woman swinging a racket that she was setting down here and there on top of different file cabinets and cubicle walls, backing away from it, looking at it, shaking her head and then moving it again.

"Where do you think this looks best?" she asked me. "I want people to notice it, but I don't want to, you know, stick it in their faces. I won this over the weekend at the country club singles tournament. Pretty, huh?"

She looked at me proudly, expectantly, and I knew I was supposed to say something, but I had no idea what it was. I felt my chest tighten and my knees soften and knew I was about to experience one wicked panic attack.

Just before I gave myself over to it, I remembered something Marty used to say about talking to people. "All you gotta do is just talk about whatever it is they're interested in, nod and agree with them every once in a while, ask a couple of questions so they know you're following them, and they'll think you're brilliant, I guarantee it."

"Um, well, I g-g-guess it looks nice over th-there w-w-where you had it . . . But r-r-right there is nice, too," I said. "Oh, and c-congratulations. How long have you been single?"

Oh my God! Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

Geez, Chip, you moron, it's not a contest to see who's been unmarried the longest. Any damn fool ought to be able to look at the trophy and see she was talking about tennis. I wanted to smack myself in the head or sink into the carpet. My face was hot and red and huge.

She laughed, of course. (The most delicious—if stinging—music I’ve ever heard.) I mean, who wouldn’t laugh at an idiotic remark like that?

But it was strange. After I stopped burning and shrinking, I noticed this was somehow different from my usual say-something-stupid-and-get-laughed-off-the-face-of-the-earth routine. It was sort of like she wasn’t laughing *at* me. Like she would have been laughing with me if only I had been laughing. I’ve seen people laugh like this at one of Marty’s lines, and although I could hardly believe that such an incredibly gorgeous and delightful-smelling woman could do such a thing, I could tell she was thinking I was quite clever. That I’d made a joke.

I’d waited a long time—twenty-seven years to be exact—for this moment, and for once I didn’t stammer. Which was surprising because one beer can get me so tongue-tied I can’t brush my teeth, and I was very intoxicated by that laugh.

“Will you go out with me?” I asked her. “On a date?”

She laughed again, and I couldn’t really tell if it was an *at* or a *with* laugh. I just hoped she wouldn’t get all mad or anything when she turned me down, like some women do. I’m used to staying home on the weekends, that doesn’t bother me. But I hate to lose a customer. Especially a customer who smells and laughs like that.

“Sure,” she said, and my heart stopped beating. “Where do you want to go?”

All I could do was shrug my shoulders and smile. I couldn’t take a chance on saying something stupid and blowing this thing now. She’d said yes!

When I was in high school, before I gave up on the idea of ever having a real social life, I used to call up girls and ask them out—or start to ask them out. What I would do, since I knew I couldn’t come up with off-the-cuff bon mots like Marty does, was write down what I wanted to say. And a lot of it was pretty clever stuff if I do say so myself. I really can be sort of charming if you just give me enough time to prepare for it.

It didn’t work, though, because it depended on the girl’s sticking to the script and saying what I had planned for her to say. She never did, and I always had to hang up on her before I got to the reason for the call. I even wrote scripts for the few dates I did have (most of these arranged by Mom) with the same disastrous results.

This time I knew there was no point in even writing a script. But after getting a haircut and a new suit and ordering some flowers and some cologne, I did go to Marty and ask him for advice.

"I really, really like this girl," I told him. "I can't believe she said yes, but she did. And I do not want to blow it. What should I do? What should I say? Where should we go?"

Marty asked me her name, and I'm kind of ashamed to say I lied and said it was Ethel. But I just couldn't take a chance on Marty's stealing her from me. And he could, too. Without even trying.

"Well, if you're nervous about talking to her, then take her someplace where you're not expected to talk, like a movie. But on second thought, a movie first date is pretty trite. Why not take her to a play? And then dinner afterwards. That way you'll have something to talk about during dinner. You can talk about the play."

That made sense. So I bought newspapers and downloaded reviews from the local bulletin boards, researching all the plays that were running in town. I marked off all the sexy ones right away 'cause I didn't want Julia to get the wrong idea. Besides, that would just defeat my purpose. I still wouldn't have anything to talk about during dinner because I am definitely not going to talk about sex with a goddess.

Next I ruled out all the really popular and long-running ones. I just knew Julia had to have a real active social life, and I felt sure she had already seen them.

All that was left was an amateur production of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. But it had been getting some really great reviews. The newspapers said it was "a treat for all ages." I wasn't sure how old Julia was, so I figured this was probably my best bet.

I knew that she had only agreed to go out with me because she had somehow mistaken my social ineptitude for cleverness and wit, and I did not want her to find out the truth, not right away. I scanned *Reader's Digest* (I have a friend who lent me the last thirty years of "Laughter, the Best Medicine" on floppy disks) and some joke books I checked out from the library. But I was far from feeling smug. I memorized some of the best stuff, but I was not at all confident that I could work any of it into the conversation.

On Wednesday night, sitting at home by myself, or rather pacing around by myself, I got nervous about the play I had chosen. Was it going to be any good? Was *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* too juvenile for Julia? I knew she'd seen the movie; was it going to bother her a lot that she knew how it ended? And so on and on till

I finally went to the theater by myself, two days before I was supposed to go with Julia.

And the play was good; in fact it was very good. The part where the Wicked Witch of the West gets her just deserts was particularly well done. If I hadn't known a little about theatrical science, I would almost have believed the old gal was actually melting.

All the way home I thought about the witch and the way Dorothy had liquidated her. And I thought about Julia and how I might already be in love with her even though all I knew about her was that she was beautiful and aromatic and liked verbal cleverness.

Then something that hardly ever happens unless I'm in front of a monitor happened. I had an idea. A great idea. A surefire, foolproof, can't-miss way to win Julia over.

I hoped.

I couldn't wait until Friday.

Which is not to say that when Friday got there I wasn't nervous. I was practically nothing but nerves. My vocal cords might as well have been paralyzed. I said, "Hello, you look n-n-n-nice," when I picked her up, then nothing—not one word—in the car, and nothing during intermission.

I certainly don't believe in telepathy, but it wasn't hard to read what Julia was thinking.

My only hope was the second act, and the impending annihilation of Oz's hydrophobic sorceress.

And there it came. The witch was setting her broom on fire and holding it out toward poor Scarecrow's flammable self.

This was it. My one and only chance. This was for all the marbles. If I bombed out now with Julia, my nerves would never allow me to go out on another date even if I could convince somebody to go with me.

Dorothy sees her friend in flames, grabs the water bucket, pitches it.

Come on, Chip, you've rehearsed this a thousand times in the past forty-eight hours. Remember to watch your timing. Marty says that's ninety percent of the game. And . . . go!

"Don't worry," I whispered to Julia as we watched the screaming, writhing witch melt into the floor. "It's just a stage she's going through."

For one endless terrible second Julia just stared at me like I was a miraculously cured deaf-mute. Unfortunately, a deaf-mute whose

first words were incredibly stupid.

And then she collapsed into high-pitched gales of laughter. I mean she drowned out the actors on stage. People were turning around, staring and ssshhing her.

Julia went on for—I'm not exaggerating—a good four or five minutes—Dorothy and her friends on stage had to wait to ask the Winkie guards for the witch's broom until my date's last rafter-reaching guffaw had subsided. Then she put her hand on my leg, wiped tears out of her eyes, and said, "God, you are so funny."

For the first time in my life, I was definitely completely in love. I would have done anything to make this woman mine and keep her laughing and looking at me like that.

I didn't have anything else rehearsed, so I didn't get off any more bon mots at our post-theater dinner, but it was all right; I didn't need to. I could coast along on the "stage" one. And making Julia laugh had loosened me up enough to where I could at least talk to her, even if it was only about everyday stuff like the weather and the World Series and the new ninety megahertz Pentium computers.

Didn't matter, she was convinced that I was funny, so she saw me that way.

I'm pretty sure if I could have summoned up enough nerve to try to kiss her goodnight she probably would have let me. I would have risked it, too, if I had worked out anything clever or witty to say at her door. But I hadn't, so I decided not to chance it that night but made a note to rehearse the winding-down part better before our next date.

Next Friday I took her to Mr. B's, a seafood place on the west side of town. I managed to get off a couple of pretty good lines about jumbo shrimp and about schools of sturgeon that were almost as well received in actuality as they were in my living room rehearsals. Julia laughed her lovely lilting laugh, and my heart melted like that witch.

I was afraid to say it even to myself for fear I might jinx it out of existence, but it sure looked as though Julia was falling for me. I could see it in her eyes and hear it in her laugh. This incredible goddess was falling for me, Microsoft would soon release Windows 4.0, and all was right with the world.

It was also kind of a sham because she was falling for this guy who was always clever and charming and getting off these puns

and stuff she liked so much. But it wasn't me. I mean it was me—I made up the jokes and everything, they weren't from a book—but it wasn't the spontaneous me.

That night went fairly well, but it was really just a setup for the following Friday when I took her to Eschycclio's, the new Greek-Italian place everybody was talking about without actually saying the name, since nobody was sure how it should be pronounced.

I had of course done my preliminary reconnaissance, dining there on the previous Monday evening to learn the menu and the decor and anything else I might be able to get off a bon mot about. I stole a menu and ran its entire contents through a program I'd created that I'd hoped would create puns.

I was getting less and less nervous around Julia. I even managed to make small talk in the car on our way to the restaurant. The only thing I was at all concerned about was the fact that Julia was going to have to help me with a straight line to set up my bon mot.

But I felt sure she would. It was a question everybody all over town was asking. When we got to Eschycclio's all she had to do was ask me, "How do you pronounce the name of this place anyway?" and I would say "I don't know. It's a Mister E to me" (you see now, of course, why we had to go to Mr. B's the week before), and she would laugh that delicious laugh again and I would definitely get a kiss tonight.

But it didn't happen. The waiter—a different guy from the one who served me Monday—messed me up. Before we had even sat down he said, "Good evening. Welcome to Esschycclio's." And he said it real slow like "Ess-chick-leo's" so there was no way Julia was going to ask me how to pronounce it after that.

Well, I had backups of course. But nothing as good as my first-string stuff. When the waiter said, "Falafel, sir?", I said "No, a slight headache, but overall I feel pretty good," and I got off another one about how we weren't antipasto; we were in fact all for it. But all they got from Julia was a polite giggle.

I was losing her. Not only was I not going to get a kiss tonight. I was never going to get another date with her, either.

I started stammering again, and I had to excuse myself, go to the men's room, and pace around trying to think of some way to make her start laughing and liking me again.

Finally, after a few dirty looks from the patrons in there, just 'cause I was talking to myself one minute and then pretending to be Julia the next, I hit on an idea.

I stepped around into the kitchen and told the chef I would give him twenty dollars to send me a tough, rubbery steak. He was very foreign and we had a tough time understanding each other. At first he didn't want to do it and he didn't want me in his kitchen, but when I upped my offer to fifty dollars, he said okay.

I went out, sat back down, ordered the surf and turf, and silently waited for my meal to arrive.

Julia was giving me that what-is-a-beautiful-woman-like-me-doing-out-with-a-computer-geek look, and there was nothing I could do about it till my meal got there. I wanted to tell her that I desperately loved her, but I knew that would only get a long, strong laughing-at laugh.

Finally my entree arrived, and I had to stay calm and go slow to keep it from looking rehearsed. I ate some of the shrimp first. Then when I turned my attention to the steak, sure enough it was tough and rubbery just as I'd surreptitiously ordered it to be.

"I am so sorry, sir," the waiter said when I told him the problem. "We have never had anything like this occur before. I will personally see to it that—"

"Please," I interrupted. "It's no big deal. The chef probably just misunderstood. He must have thought I ordered the surf and *Nerf*."

I held my breath and shifted slightly in my seat, the better to get a running start toward the door if this one did a Hiroshima.

But I needn't have worried. It worked.

Julia laughed so hard she almost choked on her bordeaux and she lost that look she'd had in her eyes earlier. I could breathe again.

Even though the Mr. E line had turned to vaporware, my comeback was good enough that I probably still could have gotten a kiss out of her that night. But my lips were chapped and dry, and now that we were actually at her door, the line I had rehearsed for this moment somehow lost its luster, so I didn't push my luck.

I was walking on air for a few days after that, but when I called and asked Julia out again she turned me down flat. She said it was because she had to go to her uncle's funeral. She said she'd take a raincheck and she looked forward to seeing me soon.

But I could tell what she really meant was "I never want to see you again. You lied to me. You're not a clever bon mot utterer. All you are is a computer nerd. A computer nerd who is never going to get a kiss from me."

And she was right. I had been crazy for trying to win her over by pretending to be a guy who's great with words. That was a plan that was doomed to fail sooner or later. But what else could I do? Be myself? That was Marty's famous useless advice. But every time I was myself, the only reaction I got from women was laughter, and it was definitely at-laughter and not with-laughter.

I guessed the truth was I had been crazy trying to win a goddess over at all. Girls like Julia and guys like me did not belong together. The head cheerleader did not go steady with the president of the audiovisual club.

I threw myself back into my work, which I had been neglecting completely what with running around to restaurants and plays and stuff and all of them twice.

What I was working on was programming a software application. Marty and I had always made a little extra money by offering Internet access. It was just a sideline, not that many people interested in it—until now. All of a sudden everybody was interested in it. Everybody wanted to ride on the information superhighway.

The problem was you gotta know the UNIX computer language to navigate, and not that many people do. What I was trying to work on was a graphical user interface program that would make surfing the Internet as easy for the newbies and novices as Microsoft Windows and most of the other software had gotten lately. We called it *Atlas, the Easy Way to Find Your Way on the Information Superhighway*. And Marty said it was going to make us both very rich someday.

I just wished I wanted to be rich. But I didn't care—about anything. The fire in my belly I always got when programming and creating software just wasn't there any more. I couldn't stop thinking about Julia. Why couldn't I be clever and spontaneous? Or why couldn't she be attracted to a man who knew his way around the inside of a computer and spoke COBOL fluently?

I just had to get her back. But how? The bon mots could be thrown off too easily to be counted on exclusively. I needed another weapon or two to fall back on. But my arsenal was empty.

Or was it?

Before I fell into the bon mot thing I used to try to get women's attention by making them feel sorry for me. It never really worked, but I always felt like it had a lot of potential.

Now if only something terrible—I mean something other than losing Julia—would happen to me. Something involving bullets or

broken bones. Maybe I could even work up a bon mot to get off while I was bleeding all over the place like Clark Gable in *Red Dust*. That would win her back.

When I woke up in the hospital early the next morning with my head all wrapped up and bandaged, the very first thing I did—even before I opened my eyes—was to call out brokenly, “Julia . . . Julia.”

But she was already there. Right by my side, where I never thought she’d ever be again. For a minute I figured I must have overdone it and sent myself past the hospital all the way to heaven, that’s how great it felt to see her.

“Oh my gosh! Chip, you’re awake!” she said. “How are you feeling? I have been so worried about you.”

“Unhhh.”

Yeah, I realized that as a mot this wasn’t particularly bon, but my brain hurt so bad I was lucky just to get that out. I wasn’t sure whether the fever I was feeling was because of the injuries I had sustained or because Julia was holding my hand.

My eyes started to adjust to the bright fluorescent lighting, and the pounding in my skull was almost bearable if I kept my head perfectly still and way back in the pillows.

I cut my eyes over for a better look at Julia and saw that Marty was there, too, sitting in a folding chair in the corner of the room. He didn’t look any too happy to see his only brother reviving, but maybe he was just giving me this time alone with Julia because he knew how much I loved her.

“Honey, the police have been by here to check on you a couple of times,” Julia said. “And they’ll be coming back a little later. They want to know if you can describe the person who did this to you and give them some more details about the crime.”

“Huh?” was all I could say. I knew she had given me some kind of information, but I didn’t hear anything after I heard her call me “honey.”

“What happened, Chip?” she simplified it for me.

Well, what actually happened was that I took all the money out of the cash register, hid the *Atlas* software prototype, and knocked myself unconscious with an electric screwdriver. But I wasn’t about to tell her or Marty or the police about that.

And it wasn’t as bad as it sounds. I didn’t really steal anything. I took the cash and bought a money order with it. In a few days I

would mail it back to the shop with the software and a note from my penitent pretend robber. No harm done, except, of course, to my cranium.

Marty wasn't even looking at me. I don't want to say my brother is insensitive, but I think he was feeling the loss of the money pretty heavily. There was more than usual in the cash register that day—about five hundred and fifty dollars—because a guy had paid cash for a new CD-ROM kit and some software. I felt bad about making my brother worry, but he'd be all right once the money was returned.

"Well, I was closing up the shop. Marty had a meeting, and he'd already left early," I told Julia. (I had thought of a couple of semi-bon mots to toss in while telling this tale, one of which involved calling this crime the Information Superhighway Robbery, but the pain in my head was so huge I couldn't remember the context. I decided to stick with the pity aspect. It seemed to be working pretty well so far.) "This guy comes up, bangs on the window. I wave at him, like we're closed, but he keeps knocking. Through the glass he tells me that he's from out of town, he's got a major report to do in the morning, and the battery in his laptop finally gave up the ghost. Would I please, please sell him a new one. Real quick, wouldn't take a minute.

"When he got in, he started asking me a bunch of questions about the *Atlas* software I was working on, and I small-talked with him while I was ringing up the battery. Then all of a sudden he said if I knew what was good for me I'd hand *Atlas* over to him.

"I thought at first it was some kind of dumb joke, and I told him to forget it, but when he pulled out a gun, I knew he wasn't kidding. He had hardware, so I gave him the software."

There, that was the other semi-bon mot I had been trying to remember. Nothing to write home about, but I didn't think anybody could reasonably be expected to come up with any red-hot knee-slappers from a hospital bed. All I really wanted that remark to do was make me sound brave and pitiful.

"Then he cleaned out the cash register and told me to turn around and face the wall. I refused at first, but he shoved that gun in my stomach. Then when I did turn around, he must have knocked me in the head or something. The next thing I remember was waking up here."

Julia smiled sadly and shook her head.

"What were you thinking, Chip?" she said. "You shouldn't have argued with the man. You should have just given him what he wanted right away. He might have killed you. Thank God he didn't."

She stroked my hand softly, covering my fingers with that scent. And I knew we would go out again; I knew I would hear her laugh again. I knew there must be a God in heaven after all.

Then there was a loud knock on the door. It was the police coming back to talk to me. No problem; I was rested, rehearsed, and ready to make my statement.

Only these cops didn't have notebooks and sketchpads. They had handcuffs.

"There are a couple of holes in your story, Chip," Marty stood up and said. "Big, big holes. The screwdriver was dusted and thoroughly checked for fingerprints, and nobody's were on it except yours. And both doors to the store were still locked from the inside. So tell me, just how did this robber escape?"

Damn.

Well, it was true, I didn't let anybody handle my tools, ever. It was a superstition of mine. And of course I locked the doors. I didn't want anybody barging in while I was hitting myself in the head with an electric screwdriver. That kind of thing is hard to explain to people.

I should have planned it better, taken my time, not been so anxious to make Julia pity me. But I don't care how clever you are, it's difficult to pull off the perfect crime while simultaneously winning the heart of the most beautiful woman in the world.

Or, judging from the way she was staring all wide-eyed at me now, alienating her completely and making her think I was some kind of particularly loathsome scuzbug.

The police read me my rights and told me they were going to post a man at my door. I'd be going to jail as soon as I felt better.

That was bad enough, but what was even worse was that Julia let go of my hand. Dropped it like a red-hot root vegetable. She even slid her chair back from my bed like she couldn't stand to be near such a black-hearted brother-robber.

Marty cut me a nasty look, then he left with the cops. But Julia stayed in the room. I almost wished she'd taken off, too. I couldn't stand the way she was looking at me, like she was modeling for a dictionary illustration of "stunned horror."

There was obviously something she wanted to say to me, and I had a strong feeling it wasn't "What a wonderful man you are. I bet you did this all for me. When you get out of prison, I'm going to laugh and laugh. Laugh and smell delicious and go on lots more dates with you, you smooth talking bon mot maker," like she was supposed to in my "what-if-I-get-caught?" script.

Judging by her eyes and by her hands that were no longer holding mine but flexing and clenching like she wished this hospital had had the forethought to supply visitors with big heavy rocks to hurl at the patients, it was probably something more along the lines of "I have known some lowdown geezwards in my time, but you are the lowest of the low. Don't ever call or even daydream about me again."

"Julia, I don't know how the guy managed to get through a locked door. I don't know why his fingerprints weren't on the screwdriver. Maybe he's an alien from another planet. Or maybe he's one of those mysterious Hindu swami guys from India that can dematerialize. All I know is I'm not lying. I was robbed. Brutally beaten. You believe me, don't you?"

That's what I wanted to say. But I didn't. I couldn't. I was too tired, and I'd lied to her too many times already.

What I actually said was not clever or brave, but it was true.

"I am so sorry, J-Julia." I shook my head, accidentally setting off a cerebellum-shattering explosion. "I know it was stupid. I know it was wrong. But all I wanted to do was make you keep on l-liking me. And it wasn't as if I was going to keep the money or—"

"Shh, Chip," she said, "don't talk any more now."

"But I have to, Julia. I have to make you understand why I did it. I have to show you—"

"What you have to do," Julia said, "is rest."

She walked back to my bedside. I instinctively drew back because I thought she might be going to slap me, but instead she adjusted my covers for me and fluffed up my pillows.

"Rest right now," she told me. "I'll be back later and we can—"

What?!

"You will? Really? You'll be back? You mean you're still speaking to me? You don't hate me?"

She reached out and clasped my hand once more.

"Of course I don't hate you, goofball. I'll be back in a few hours with Mr. Walters—he owes me a favor after all that unpaid overtime I put in last month—and we can start preparing your case."

My case. That was right. The thought of losing Julia forever was so horrible I'd forgotten it wasn't my only problem.

"Boy, I have really messed things up this time," I told her. "Yesterday I was working on the Information Superhighway; tomorrow I'll probably be on the chain gang."

Hey, wow! I knew it wasn't Seinfeld quality, but that one was completely spontaneous. I made it up right on the spur of the moment. Maybe I was getting better at this bon mot business. Maybe if Julia was serious about not hating me I really could keep her verbally captivated and not have to continue assaulting myself.

Ignoring the pain in my head, I turned and looked at the woman I loved.

She didn't laugh at my baby bon mot, but she smiled so hard a couple of tears welled up in her eyes.

I really think that if I could have lifted my two ton head off those pillows I could have kissed her for real. But I didn't want to rush things. I might have been reading the moment wrong, so I stayed where I was.

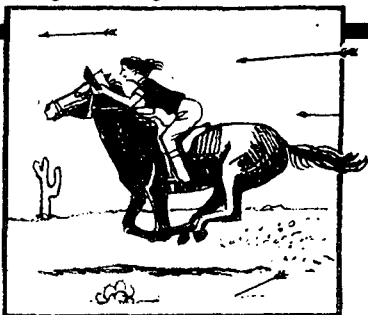
Besides, she was coming back. She said she would.

So I would have time to work up and rehearse some sweet nothings or some hospital-humor bon mots. Something to set the mood. Our first kiss was really going to be something special, and I wanted to do it right.

Julia the goddess was coming back.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



M.D. Lake continues to tread ground somewhere between Amanda Cross and Sue Grafton. **Once upon a Crime** (Avon, \$4.99), is the sixth entry in Lake's entertaining series featuring an intrepid and witty campus cop named Peggy O'Neill. A newly endowed room in the university library is devoted solely to Hans Christian Andersen, a literary giant in this Midwestern region teeming with folks of Scandinavian descent. To celebrate its opening and to showcase the centerpiece collection of recently discovered Andersen letters, scholars from around the world are converging for an Andersen conference. Peggy, on leave due to an injury, has been coaxed into a walk-on part in a student play scheduled for the festivities. But there's controversy surrounding the letters, and the conference's guest speaker is despised by his colleagues. Added to this scenario are dark secrets and old rivalries, which set the stage for a murderous tale. Working with her buddy on the local homicide squad, Peggy agrees to use her insider's knowledge of the university and its major players to catch a killer. Readers looking for a sassy tour guide through the halls of academia will love this literary mystery.

Boston private eye John Francis Cuddy returns in **Rescue** (Pocket, \$20), Jeremiah Healy's tenth book in this fine series. Cuddy plays good Samaritan and stops on the highway to change a tire for a teenage girl and a boy. Both strike Cuddy as scared, and the boy, Eddie, disfigured by a birthmark, shyly makes Cuddy promise that if he's ever lost, Cuddy will find him. The next day their car is found abandoned. The girl's body is recovered; Eddie, however, is missing. Thus begins Cuddy's search, a terrible journey

that pulls him into horror in an isolated New England cabin, a murder and a coverup, and finally to the Florida Keys and a sect that brings new meaning to the world evil. The odyssey isn't for the faint of heart as Healy explores the darkest corners of the human heart; but several of the characters literally shine from the pages and burn into memory.

At last Ellis Peters' beloved Brother Cadfael series has shown up on PBS's *Mystery!* series, making her most recent medieval novel timely indeed. **Brother Cadfael's Penance** (Mysterious Press, \$18.95) places the former Crusader in the thick of politics in the year 1145. Warring political factions have forced the herbalist monk to leave his chosen life and act against his Benedictine superior's orders. He may never be allowed to return, so it's with a heavy heart that he journeys to a well-guarded castle to find a murderer and to make an offer: he will take the place of one of the great Lord's hostages, Olivier. He can do no less, for Olivier—though he doesn't know it—is Cadfael's son, born without his knowledge from a liaison in foreign lands before Cadfael joined the monastery. Peters' fans can look forward to reacquainting themselves with series regulars as well as meeting fascinating new faces, while Cadfael struggles with his priorities, his loyalties, and his duty.

The Weatherman by Steve Thayer (Viking, \$21.95) is a powerful, nightmarish thriller drawn on a grand scale. Harrowing scenes of Minnesota weather are the backdrop to a horrific series of killings of young women that send shock waves through the entire state and finally to its Supreme Court. At the heart of the story are several members of the local TV station's news team: the beautiful female newscaster, the writer disfigured in Vietnam, and the aloof on-camera weatherman whose near-psychic climatic predictions have boosted the station to the top of the ratings. Thayer's depiction of the harsh and sometimes unforgiving climate of this region—political and moral, as well as weatherwise—raises this thriller to the level of tragedy.

Meg O'Brien's strong writing always promises a sure-footed mystery tale, and **Thin Ice** (Bantam, \$4.99) is no exception. The novel opens as Mary Clare Ryan frantically attempts to flee danger and instead runs right into its arms. After her funeral, her older sister Nikki struggles to come to terms with Mary Clare's fatal car accident. Nikki has lost her only surviving family member only three months after the man she loves has left Georgetown to continue his film career on the West Coast. Although Nikki reared Mary

Clare, the two had grown apart. Mary Clare was a brilliant biologist immersed in research at a Catholic hospital, a quiet and meek workaholic whose friends were mostly the nuns who ran the facility. Now Nikki has only questions, and no one around to give her answers, which is probably why she impulsively flies to L.A. on the ticket Mary Clare had booked to attend a conference in her area of biology research. This is fast-paced, well-plotted, and rich in characterization, a sophisticated and contemporary offspring of romantic suspense parentage.

E. C. Ayres teams up a softboiled Florida private eye with a practical, hard-nosed female cop in **Hour of the Manatee** (St. Martin's, \$4.99). Although Tony Lowell grew up among the blueblood denizens of Palm Coast Harbor, he was the blue collar son of the police chief. A thwarted romance with an admiral's daughter, a stint in the service, and even some celebrity as a press photographer are now all firmly in his past. Or so he believes. Then an old woman, formerly a housekeeper in one of the great houses, comes to hire him and is murdered practically on his doorstep. This means that Tony must go home again, even though Detective Lena Bedrosian is hard on his heels with a warrant for his arrest. Tony will renew an old friendship, meet his old flame, and finally learn the real ending of that painful chapter in his hometown life.

No Night Is Too Long (Harmony Books, \$23) is the latest from another British mistress of mystery, Ruth Rendell writing as Barbara Vine. Three people tell this tale of obsessive love from their own points of view, and only after all three have spoken does the reader see the entire picture. The novel opens with Tim, who is living a reclusive life in the small seaside home that was his late mother's. Two years earlier Tim was a callow university student who began an affair with an older geology professor named Ivo Steadman. Tim reluctantly agrees to accompany Ivo on a nature cruise of Alaskan waters, only to learn that he must amuse himself for two weeks in a boring Alaskan town before he can join Ivo on the cruise. In those two weeks he meets Isabel, who is staying at the same dreary hotel on a mission of mercy: her best friend is dying, and she has come to pay her respects. His immediate attraction to her ultimately proves to have dire consequences for all three members of this love triangle. Riveting in its subtle characterizations, richly textured in its depictions of exotic landscapes, *No Night Is Too Long* is impossible to put down until its final, shocking pages.

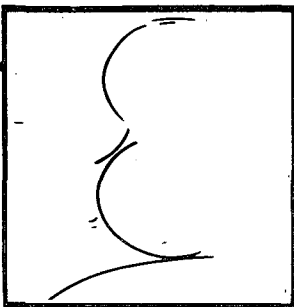
Christine Andrae's first novel featuring her Washington, D.C.,

housesitting professor, Lee Squires, was nominated for an Edgar. Now Lee is off to Montana to fill in as cook on a working dude ranch in **Grizzly** (St. Martin's, \$19.95), which should increase the number of her fans. The J-E Dude Ranch was the site of many memorable childhood summer vacations for Lee, and she's happy to help the new owners feed a group of Japanese businessmen who are potential investors. She remembers the sons, Dave and Mac, as boys, and they haven't changed all that much. Dave has married, and he and his wife Trudy run the place; the charming Mac has evolved from nature photographer to dedicated environmentalist. He is the founder of the Sacred Paw Institute, dedicated to studying and saving the region's bear population. When Lee discovers a body on a wooded hiking trail, however, her nose for sleuthing takes her out of the kitchen and into some thorny areas involving ecology, the financial reality for independent ranchers, and the dangers inherent in some people's dreams of success.

Fans of P. D. James have probably already heard that there's a new Commander Adam Dalgliesh mystery, **Original Sin** (Knopf, \$24), on bookstore shelves. Accompanying Dalgliesh and his ambitious assistant, Detective Kate Miskin, James takes readers into the claustrophobic world of Peverell Press, one of London's oldest publishing firms. Peverell Press is housed in a mock Venetian palace on the Thames called Innocent House; James has depicted it as an elegant and anachronistic world unto itself. The company, however, is in the financial straits that have brought so many independent publishers to their knees in the past few decades. But one of the two old men who founded the firm has been retired, and the other has recently died, leaving the managing director, Gerard Etienne, free to begin his restructuring plans. They include selling Innocent House, firing many staff members who have spent their entire working lives with Peverell, and cutting some of their oldest authors from the list. A murderer, however, has an entirely different agenda, which Dalgliesh and his team must uncover. James offers a fascinating peek into the publishing scene while developing a strong cast of characters in a compelling plot.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Disney's **Bad Company** and **Shallow Grave**, an import from Scotland, are a pair of films that deal with morality. In each, the characters are in a position to benefit greatly by committing a wrong. With greed as their prime instinct, we have an essential ingredient for a couple of entertaining films *noirs*. One succeeds; the other falls flat.

What's a poor international secret agent to do with no Communists to dog in the post-Cold War era? We find out in *Bad Company*, a Seattle-set film that could be subtitled *Ruthless in Seattle* for all its plotting, counterplotting, backstabbing, and double- and triple-crosses.

It begins with a job-hunting Nelson Crowe (Laurence Fishburne), who's been bounced from the CIA for keeping a bribe intended for an Iraqi official. "Blackmail, bribery, sub-

version, the odd kidnapping," Crowe crows of his work experience.

Margaret Wells (Ellen Barkin), the sexy interviewer, is pleased with her applicant, but she's got to run it by Mr. Grimes (Frank Langella). He's chief at The Grimes Organization, a privately run spy shop that performs for wealthy clients whatever their wealth can buy.

Crowe is assigned to bribe a state supreme court judge one million dollars to decide in favor of Grimes's client.

But all the while, we can't be sure whom Crowe is really working for. He joins Wells, with whom he is having a torrid affair, in a plot against Grimes to take over the company. But he might actually still be working for the CIA.

Laurence Fishburne is a pretty cool customer as the spy

who may or may not have come in from the cold. His thin ties, white shirts, and poker face give him a laid-back, fifties edge.

Ellen Barkin plays a tough woman, à la Demi Moore in *Disclosure*, who won't hesitate to use her muscular legs or any other body part to get what she wants, be it power, pleasure, or both. Unfortunately for Barkin, her character is so devoid of charm or redeeming value that any attempt to bring life to the role is a waste of effort. Langella suffers a similar fate. For the most part, the scenery—the high-tech bunker headquarters of The Grimes Organization and Grimes's Ralph Lauren-inspired country house—is more compelling than these unsympathetic characters.

Meanwhile, back in Glasgow in *Shallow Grave*, a trio of care-free young roommates are looking for a fourth for their spacious and colorful flat. And the interviews by Alex (Ewan McGregor), Juliette (Kerry Fox), and David (Christopher Eccleston) are considerably more lighthearted than that of *Bad Company's* Margaret Wells.

Potential roomies are asked to name that tune and give their views on anything from leveraged buyouts to satanic sacrifice. The trio choose Hugo, who claims he's a novelist searching for the "human condition."

Shortly, however, the only condition he finds is the dead condition. And when Alex, Juliette, and David discover his naked corpse casually draped in a scarlet bedsheet, they also discover a suitcase full of cash.

Alex, a budding newspaper reporter, wants to keep it. Juliette, a doctor, isn't sure. David, the straight-laced accountant, wants no part of it.

Finally, when they do agree, it's the reluctant and timid David who draws the short straw: he must dispose of the body and rid it of any identifying parts.

At first, Alex and Julie celebrate their newfound riches with a shopping spree, after which they get drunk and giddy. David becomes completely paranoid and withdrawn. He moves into the attic, where he hides the money and scampers about like a monkey, spying on the other two through holes he's drilled in the ceiling. Soon, however, the alliances shift again as the three lose control over the situation.

When a pair of thugs come looking for Hugo, the terror and suspense escalate.

Director Danny Boyle does a delicious job of keeping writer John Hodge's story alive and vibrant and his characters interesting and changing, despite the story's dark subject matter—murder and theft.

THE STORY THAT WON



The January Mysterious won by Richard Tanner see. Honorable mentions of Woodside, New York; skine, Alberta, Canada; Point, Ontario, Canada;

Alberta, Canada; Marvin W. Goodman of Westwood, Kansas; Julie Yarbrough of Scottsdale, Arizona; Mike Katz of Santa Barbara, California; E. Holden O'Hearn of Guilderland Center, New York; R. W. Steinke of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada; and Catherine Anne Merrell of Lake Forest, California.

Photograph contest was II of Kingsport, Tennessee to Susan Kloszewski Signe Carstairs of Er-Bob Wynn of Young's R. J. Stevens of Calgary,

I DREAM OF JEANIE by Richard Tanner II

The two old men strolled down the path together, silently surveying the bleak washed landscape of the park. Most of the trees, having been stripped of their colorful leaves, stood naked beneath the smooth gray canopy of the autumn sky.

"Jeanie McCullah!" said the elder man, pointing a crooked finger at the broken lamppost a few yards ahead. "I hadn't thought of her in years." He paused a moment, expecting a remark of some kind from his companion, but received only a confused look. "Jeanie," he went on, "was a girl I knew ages ago when I was in college. Every evening she'd be waiting by the lamppost in the park near campus, where I'd rush to meet her. It was very romantic. The lamplight would shimmer off her long honey hair, and the way it highlighted the graceful curves of her body was more than enough to start a young man's blood to boiling. I used to call her my Jeanie-of-the-lamp," he said, "because the things that girl could do were nothing short of magic."

The old man wiped a bit of spittle from the upturned corners of his mouth and stood in silent memory of days gone by.

"Whatever became of her?" his companion finally asked.

"Well," the old man said, "social pressures forced a rather abrupt ending to our relationship. Society has always frowned on women who engage in the world's oldest profession, and like that lamppost there, my Jeanie got busted."

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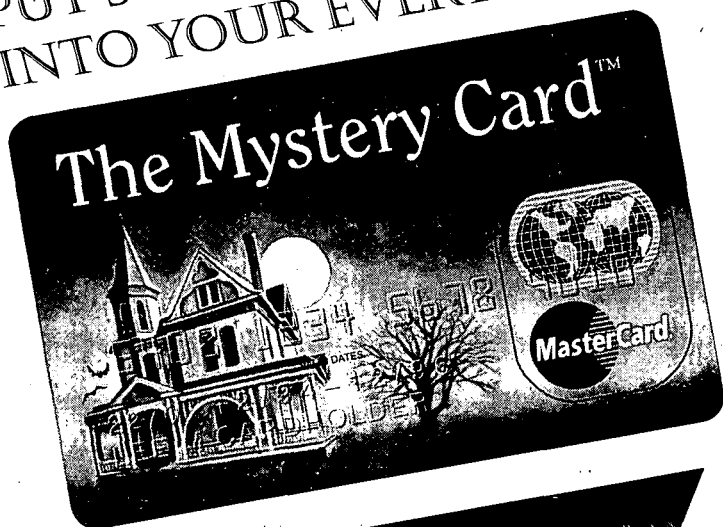
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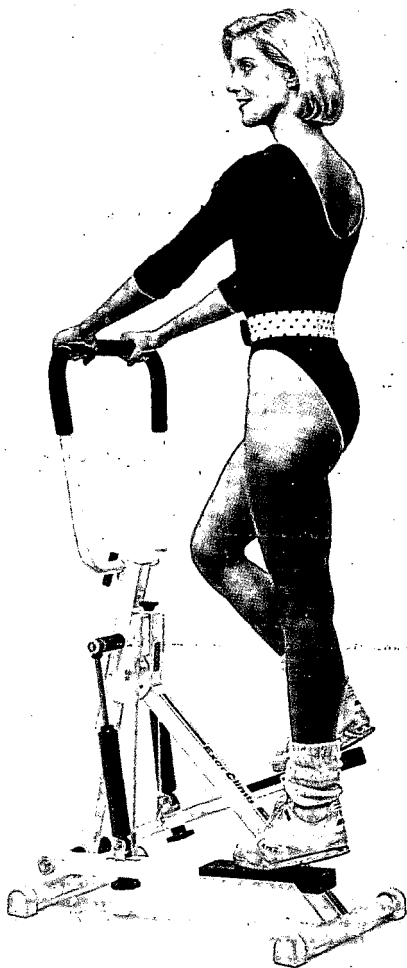
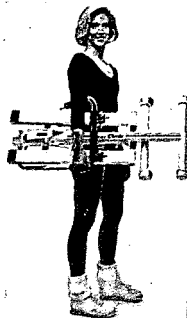
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